烙印の紋章 Ⅲ

竜の翼に天は翳ろう

杉原智則
イラスト●3

電撃文庫

好きに使ってよい――というのであれば、その兵力で、
アークスの首級を挙げても構わぬ、
ということでありましょうか
剣闘士から皇太子へ オルバ
烙印の紋章 Ⅲ

ガーベラの存続がかかった一大事だ。
見えんままの男にそれを託してよいはずはない。
さて、どこから衝いたものか
ガーベラの貴族
ノウェ・サウザンテス

あれが。——異国の方
タウーリアの姫 エスメナ・バズガン

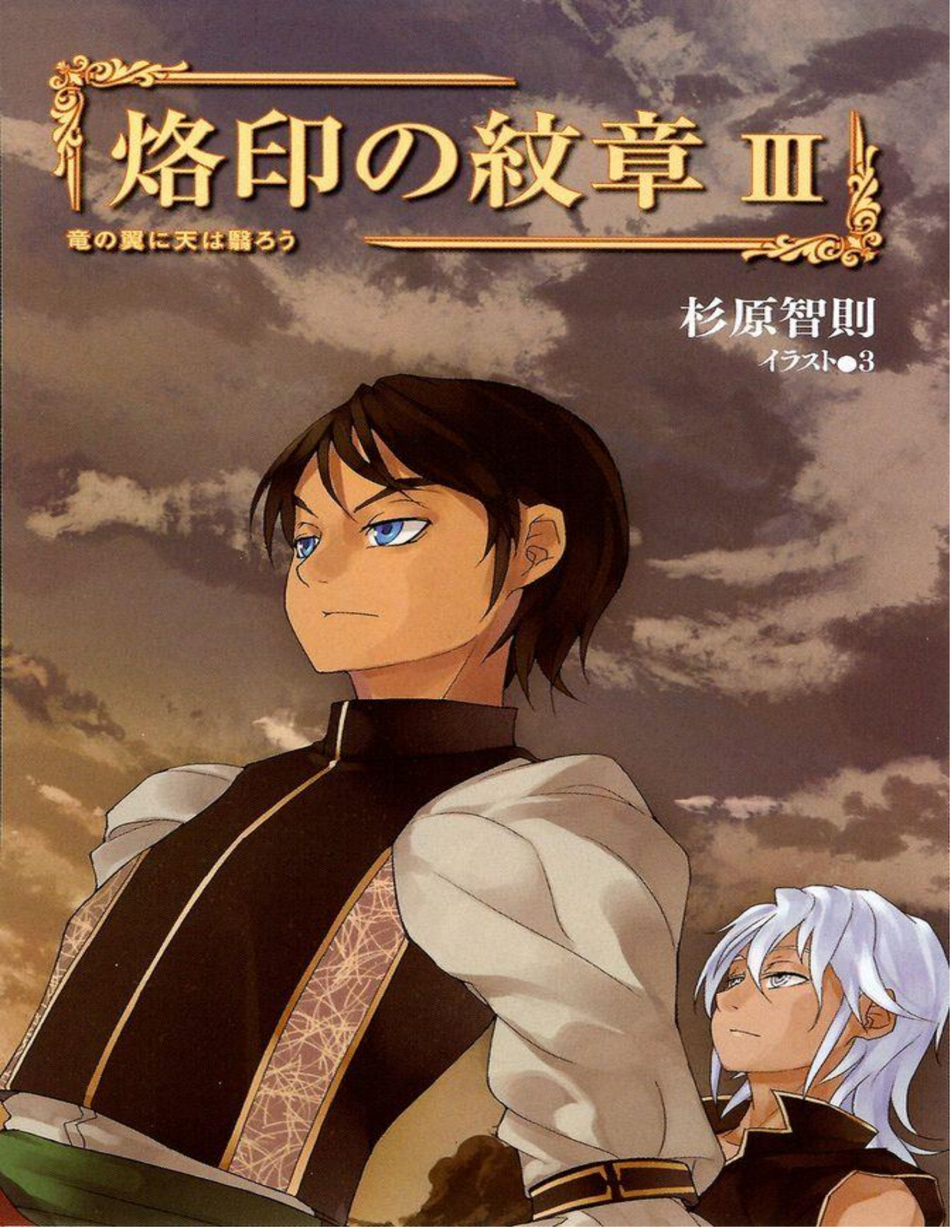
どのみち、おれも奴の泣きっ面をこの目で拝まんことには、
二度とやすからな眠りなど訪れまい。
次は、おれ自らが出る！
タウーリア領主
アークス・バズガン

何かお考えあってのものとお見受けします。
アークス・バズガンに、勝てるのですね
ガーベラ国第三王女
ビリーナ・アウエル

烙印の紋章 Ⅲ

竜の翼に天は翳ろう

杉原智則
イラスト●3



Central Continent

デザイン●カマベヨシヒコ

Prologue

The water bathed in light as it splashed about.

“Orba! You’re not coming? The cold water feels really nice!”

Alice called out to him from the river’s shoal. Her white legs were bare under the cuffs of her trousers as she frolicked about like a child. After all, it was a hot day out. Stretched out on the shore, Orba gave an unenthusiastic reply.

Back then, Alice had also called Orba and his brother over while standing in the river. His older brother Roan, who was not as good at swimming as Orba, had eventually been pulled along by Alice and been comically at a loss of what to do in the water.

In the end, nothing changes.

These were the thoughts Orba had as he looked up vacantly. That had been one month before the recurring skirmishes between the two countries, Mephius and Garbera, intensified. Apta Fortress, located close to the village where they lived, got besieged by the Garberan forces and the Mephian army started recruiting soldiers from the neighbouring villages. There were, of course, also those who applied for the army themselves, having given up on the high taxes, but half of them still got recruited against their will.

Orba’s older brother Roan had been one of them. Instead of picking up a sword, his brother was more the type to open a book and teach things to children, but he’d left the village with a smile on his face. It was about two weeks ago that Orba and Alice had watched his back retreating in the distance.

And waiting for Orba was a not so ordinary daily life. An arid wind blew through the barely fertile, steep, rugged, and rocky wastelands

surrounding the village. The best way pass the time in a situation like this was to dive into the river beneath the cliffs and swim around.

“You had a fight again with Doug from the other village, didn’t you?” Alice said, smiling, as she shook off the droplets of water in her hair.

“It wasn’t a fight. It was a duel.”

“Sure, sure - a duel,” Alice said, suppressing a giggle. “How come the two of you can’t get along, though? I met him at the festival last year and he seemed like a polite, good kid, asking me ‘How is Orba-kun doing?’ and such.”

“He uses cowardly tactics when he can’t win a duel. He might’ve ensnared you, Alice, but I don’t intend to let myself get careless. This is the same guy that tricked us when he said he saw a wild dragon. Thanks to him, we ended up walking all over the place…”

“It wasn’t us but only you that got tricked, right? *We* were just forced to come along with you.”

“That’s not true. Wasn’t everybody excited about it? Even Roan-niisan?”

Suddenly, the smile on Alice’s face disappeared. Also holding his tongue, Orba laid his half-risen body back on the ground. The unnatural silence continued for a while until Orba again heard the sound of splashing water.

At the same time he could hear her humming.

Alice liked to sing. She resembled her father in that, who always sang in a loud voice when drunk. But even so, she rarely ever took up singing in public. He had heard her sing among the rocks just outside of the village once. And one time at the annual festival, the men had invited her from among the women to sing. Back then, Orba had noticed Alice get a bright flush to her cheeks and move away as if trying to escape.

And you've got such a nice voice.

He looked up at the clear sky above. Was his brother looking up at the same view?

It had already been two weeks since he left. His brother's absence from home had become a usual thing, because he'd always been working in the capital, but right now time seemed to be passing by very slowly. Especially when he and his mother were having their meals.

To forget his anxiousness and worries, in between his job of looking after the small number of livestock, he never got tired of absorbing himself in reading the books he'd received as presents from his brother. When his eyes moved over the words, Orba turned from a powerless boy from a tiny back country into barbarian king Gape, dragon-slaying hero Clovis, or the adventurer known as Marlow, who had crossed the sea to finally arrive at the world of snow and ice where the Winged Tribe lived.

And when he chased the texts and it became to hard for him to endure the throbbing rush of blood in his body, he would always pick up his wooden sword and wield it so engrossedly until not a single drop of sweat could leave his body anymore.

One day, I'll go there too!

Blocking the scorching sun with the palm of his hand, Orba hardened that determination for the umpteenth time.

I'll take up the sword and fight in a war somewhere. I'll flourish, become a hero, and make mom happy. Then I can wield a sword and fight in my brother's stead.

He clenched the hand he used to block the sun tightly into a fist and, having read those many stories, imagined carving his own name among those dazzling military records.

There was still some warmth lingering in his hand. It was at this time that he wished he could've given his brother a hand when he left. He still remembered that touch even now. Back when he had to part from everyone and before he'd turned around, Roan had promptly held out his hand, but Orba had been too embarrassed and refused to give him a hand.

"It's okay," Roan had said as he'd grabbed his hand tight. "Before long, good things will happen to you."

Ever since then, Orba thought that his brother's words held some strange hidden meaning within.

"Alice?"

He swiftly raised his head when he noticed the sound of splashing water and Alice's humming had ceased. He saw that Alice's figure had become smaller. Near the river bank, where the river got wider, even an adult wouldn't be able to stand. And Alice was already up to her chest in the water.

"Hey, Alice!"

Alice turned her head only once and gave Orba an enigmatic smile. Then she faced forward again, took one step, then another, and kept moving further away from Orba. No matter how many times he called after her, she wouldn't stop.

Yelling out to her in his loudest voice, Orba started running for the river. His feet splashed into the water and before long he was paddling with both arms and legs, dead set on moving forward. He slipped his head underneath the surface, but even though the river's transparency was high, he couldn't spot her underwater. Then, when he raised his head to catch his breath, something clung to him from behind.

“Ah!”

“Surprised?”

Alice was giggling close to his ear. Her clothes were soaking wet, and he could feel her body, as well as her warm breath, touching him. Orba was at a loss for words and he frantically tried to get out of her embrace.

“Wait!” the girl, three years his senior, whispered, as her warm breath tickled Orba’s ears. “Stay like this for a while.”

This is… She couldn’t be crying, right?

Orba immediately thought.

He couldn’t remember for how long they’d huddled together. He was certain that, while their two bodies continued to drift about in the water with the sun burning above their heads, he could hear Alice make a small sob every now and then as her warm body pushed against him.

This is…

Orba thought again, slowly dozing off into the space between sleep and reality.

The touch of her skin pushing against him, although it wasn’t the truth of what happened, left burning traces in his heart that remained there even now from that hot day long past.

Just what was going on? What is it that Alice wanted from me? No… this wasn’t about me...

Orba turned over in his bed and suddenly woke up. There wasn’t the touch of iron as he hit the bed. In other words, that depressing iron mask wasn’t currently covering his face. Sitting up on his bed, Orba timidly brushed his fingers across his cheek.

It was his own skin after all.

Wiping the perspiration away, Orba crossed the spacious room and opened the curtains. From the balcony overlooking the garden, he could see the streets of the imperial city Solon.

This was not the remote village surrounded by steep cliffs and discoloured earth. Orba was no longer the boy from back then, but he was no longer a slave or gladiator either. The twists and turns of fate had somehow made him carry the name and face of Gil Mephius, the firstborn prince of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius.

But the sky was blue.

At least that remained the same. And the many emotions burning inside his chest also hadn't changed from his childhood days.

He leaned against the side of the bed and unconsciously pulled the sword he kept close out of his sheath. He stared at the name 'Orba' engraved in the blade, and steeled his heart in order to again wear this flesh-coloured mask today.

Imperial Capital Departure

Part 1

A sparrow wandered astray over the stone pavings.

It cocked its head once, twice, perplexed by a feeling of estrangement and then flapped its wings in a fluster.

Immediately following, a gust of wind rushed past as a gigantic shadow soared overhead. At a glance, it might be seen as a living creature. Its long neck, a ferocious face baring its fangs, and its large wings spread at its sides—a wyvern.

Alas, things like winged dragons did not inhabit this continent. Its howl, shrill as the creaking of metal, sounded from the humming of its ether engine, and its skin was the weightless metal, dragonstone, lightly painted over in bronze. Namely, this was the Mephius Empire's airship.

These man-made wyverns carrying pilots in their bosoms took off from the ground in succession.

Orba looked up to watch them, his hand forming a visor over his eyes.

Flying front was the man named Neil Thompson, and simply being fairly skilled made him stand out greatly above the rest. Neil beautifully tilted the ship's wings to a turn as the other ships frantically chased after it, like chicks straying from its mother.

But the one Orba hurled words of anger towards amongst them following their momentary return was Neil.

"This is no place to make a show of your theatrics! Pay more attention to the others! You won't be able to do anything by yourself on the battlefield. Now, have another go."

Pressed on by Orba—or to them, the first crown prince of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius, Gil Mephius—the pilots hurriedly launched off to the skies in their ships once more.

“You don’t have to be so snappy, do you? I think they’re doing on the better side.”

Orba roughly shook off Shique who came snuggling onto his shoulder.

“It doesn’t matter how well they do for ‘slaves’. You think I can be satisfied with such a level?”

The parade ground near the Imperial Guards’ barracks; a small-scale gladiator arena rebuilt. Small as it may be called, its extensive interior housed an airship runway and to add, was situated beside the dragons’ stable.

“But you know, Orba,” the bronzen faced Gowen spoke, “it’s not even been a month since you started the airship unit. There’s not much you can do even if you’re running out of patience.”

“I wouldn’t have expected to hear that from you. You’re the one who sent me out to kill in under two weeks of teaching me how to hold a sword.”

“There’s no meaning in using slaves as a comparison, is there?” Gowen replied, directing Orba’s words back at him. “There are different circumstances now compared to then. You can’t buy however much of them as you want.”

Even if these former slaves didn’t fall behind soldiers in terms of individual skill, they had trouble cooperating in numbers. And it was because it was Gowen, who was retraining the infantry comprising of the swords slaves from scratch, saying this that these words held persuasive power.

Orba said no more. His face twisted slightly in pain as he moved to cross his arms. His right arm was dressed in bandages and stood hanging.

—Roughly half a month had passed since the disturbance caused by Zaat Quark's rebellion. Injured from the series of battles during the gladiator's tournament and to further add, being shot by Zaat Quark, his body naturally had yet to recover. However one week prior, Orba was summoned by the emperor and ordered to head for the southern city of Apta—the land taken in the ten year strife with Garbera and the very fortress city his brother Roan had been drafted to. There was no time for him to allow his body to rest. Just when Shique and Gowen thought he was holing himself up in his room buried under a mountain of books, they'd find him zealously directing the Imperial Guard's training like so.

"Ah, there you go, quiet again." Shique shrugged his shoulders in jest. "We get indescribably uneasy when you turn silent. I can't help thinking that you might be getting weird thoughts again."

At that time, a lively voice sounded.

"A wonderful sight, isn't it!"

When he heard this voice which was out of place in this brutish location, Orba's face tensed for some reason.

Gowen and Shique were slightly amused at seeing this and shifted their gaze taking a smile.

"It pains me to say that it is not anything much for a proper lady to see."

The one they laid sight on was Garbera's third princess, Vileena Owell, accompanied by her maid Theresia. Her platinum hair shone a transparent white under the morning sun. She had been forced into the women's chambers since her coming to Mephius, but with her efforts flying the airship together with the prince during Zaat's rebellion, she

seemed to have been given a relative amount of freedom as of late. Two days ago after mentioning how the Imperial Guards were doing air training at breakfast, she had exclaimed ‘I simply must watch’.

The young girl’s eyes squinted as they followed the airships’ movements, and her cheeks flushed lightly.

She’s an unusual princess.

Orba strongly reaffirmed this thought.

After the mission at Apta ended, they would formally become married—as Emperor Guhl had declared, but that was ultimately only said to Gil and not openly announced. With the progress in discussions over the wedding obscure, Vileena was as she had always been, in an insecure position.

“His Highness is a perfectionist after all,” Shique commented, intentionally returning to the previous conversation. “He tells them ‘fly shoulder to shoulder with the Garberan airship platoon’ within under a month of training.”

“I didn’t—”

—say that, he tried to refute, but before he could continue...

“There is always a beginning to everything. Air training in particular comes with accidents. If you do not pay careful attention to the pilots’ condition, the ship’s maintenance and such, then your platoon will assuredly be destroyed before you can achieve its desired growth, your Highness.”

With regard to airships, Vileena was an expert. She spoke proudly in a sharp tone with her childish face.

“But there also isn’t much time left until departure.”

Orba averted his gaze from Vileena who tried to confront him directly.

“Is it not all right if you also perform them in Apta, your Highness?” Shique said. “It’s as if you believe Ax might try to commence war the very day we arrive in Apta.”

Zaat’s rebellion had been quelled by Orba’s hand, but because it happened during the founding festival where a good number of envoys had been invited, news of it reached the surrounding countries. Furthermore, there were reports of suspicious activity from the Taúlia province located southwest to Mephius around the same time.

Taúlia bordered the Aptan region. It was probable Taúlia’s governing general, Ax Bazgan, would target the moment Apta was returned by Garbera and advance his army there.

However, with Zaat’s rebellion, Guhl Mephius was in a precarious situation where he could not trust his retainers, even those serving him longest. For that reason, Guhl had appointed his born son, Gil, to commander of Apta’s troops, deeming it inappropriate to divide his troops to fend off invasion.

“It’ll only be trouble if I don’t get them ready as soon as possible. I’ve realised since Zaat’s incident. No matter how peacefully we may have joined with Garbera, the flames of dissent are always at our feet even within our country’s borders. There’s no harm in being too prepared.”

“Speaking of Zaat Quark, I have not seen Ineli since the incident. Have you met with her since then, prince?”

“Ineli?”

The unexpected name left Orba half startled. “No.” He shook his head. Vileena angrily knit her eyebrows.

“Please also pay some attention to things outside of military affairs. Being taken prisoner by Zaat surely must have given her a fright. Is she not shutting herself in her room? I have been meaning to visit her, but what say you we go together?”

“Well, that is…”

Orba wasn’t sure what to say. As Vileena had mentioned, Ineli was taken prisoner by Zaat in the midst of the uproar. And in front Orba and Vileena who went to save her, she had a gun thrust at her. But what went through Orba’s mind now wasn’t that, but the scene he had seen at the party during the founding festival; the one where Ineli and Vileena glared at one another by the fountain.

The Garberan princess seemed to have already long forgotten their discord, but as for Ineli, he didn’t believe she would be as forgiving. Rather, judging from her personality, being saved by the Vileena she hated and so detested, she would have felt it humiliating.

“I think it’s best if you don’t.”

“Why do you say so?”

“Well, the thing is, if she’s received a shock from that incident, it’s best to gently leave it alone. If either I or the princess go see her, it might bring back the memories and do more harm than good.”

“See, princess? It’s as I told you.” Theresia said. “I am of the same opinion of as His Highness. It’s best to quietly leave Ineli alone precisely if you’re worried about her.”

“What is this. The prince, and Theresia as well, are treating my feelings as if they were an oblivious child’s.”

Her face quickly fell into a sulk and she stomped her small feet against the ground. In fact, it was because it was exactly as she said that Orba

was lost for words. She was overall a quick-witted princess albeit young, but when it came to the subtleties in personal relations, she was poorly informed.

Orba unintentionally sent a look over to Theresia.

It must be tough.

The princess' maid was momentarily surprised, then slightly turned her eyes down and chuckled in agreement.

Damn it!

Orba was also surprised. He had expressed his sentiments towards Theresia, but it was as 'Orba'. Not the crown prince. That was probably why Theresia had also been surprised.

"Now," Orba spoke up in an attempt to try to smooth things over. "I will, then, patiently wait out the airship unit's results. I, am going to check out the dragon's situ—"

Orba turned to look at the dragon's stable by the parade ground, but right at that moment, he saw several figures heading this way. In front, skipping her way towards them, was a petite girl. Coming up to Orba, Ronnie Lorgo stopped and tugging her skirt, made a bow.

"Fare greetings, your Imperial Highness."

"Aah."

She was daughter of Mephius' general, Odyne Lorgo, and thirteen years old. Though a young girl, she had saddled on top a dragon's back during the founding festival and carried out the coming-of-age ceremony.

"Hurry and come over. Oh Romus, even though you're not afraid of dragons, you're helplessly shy around people."

She loudly called over the young boy timidly toddling behind. As always, his greetings in front of the prince were soft.

“Really, you’re spineless.”

“No, it’s not that he’s spineless, but that milady here is strong,” Orba jested. “Your courage is promising. However, the dragons’ stable isn’t suitable as a playground.”

“Oh my. It’s not that we are strolling around here for no apparent reason, prince,” Ronnie responded disapprovingly in a lady-like manner. “Romus has been coming here everyday and as his senior I’ve gotten concerned for him.”

“Oh? Is Romus aspiring to be a dragoon?”

“He is not, your highness. Romus, you’re really here for the dragon, aren’t you? It’s not that you’re longing to become a dragoon, right?”

“W-what’s that to do with you.”

Romus’ face reddened. There was one other coming from the dragon stable’s direction. The dragon trainer Hou Ran assigned as part of the prince’s Imperial Battalion. It seemed she was looking over the dragoon’s training. Even if she wasn’t, she was usually here at the stable caring for the dragons all day.

“There’s no need to worry about Romus.”

Ran said outright, as if she had heard the conversation from start to end.

“He’s gotten even more used to dragons than Orba. In another half year, he might be able to hear and understand their ‘voice’. There’s little to no chance he will get attacked even at the dragon’s stable.”

Theresia breathed a gasp of wonder. She found not only Ran's nomadic appearance unusual, but also the combination of her proportional body, dark skin, and pale hair to be strangely alluring.

"If that's what you say, I'm sure that's how it is. How are the dragoons' condition? And have you sorted the dragons we will take with us to Apta?"

"I can somehow manage if I'm with them. As long as they're within my eye's reach. No one here has even a fragment of Romus' talent. More than sorting the dragons Orba will need to sort the soldiers."

"R-Right."

"Also, aren't the dragons we're bring with us a bit too many to not be using the carrier? With the numbers Orba's said, it's more than I can manage."

"Not using the carrier?"

Shique raised his voice in alarm.

"Why? Marching to Apta in file will take a week. Transporting the dragons and weapons would also be more convenient with a carrier."

"Because I want to be seen off and cheered by the people."

Orba's response was blunt. It was times like these his behaviour denoted a reluctance to voice his thoughts any further. Because Shique and Gowen understood this, they made no further protest, bearing a look that said *here we go again.*

"*Orba*, is it."

But Princess Vileena's attention seemed to be hung on something else. The thought "oh crap" could be read on the prince's face.

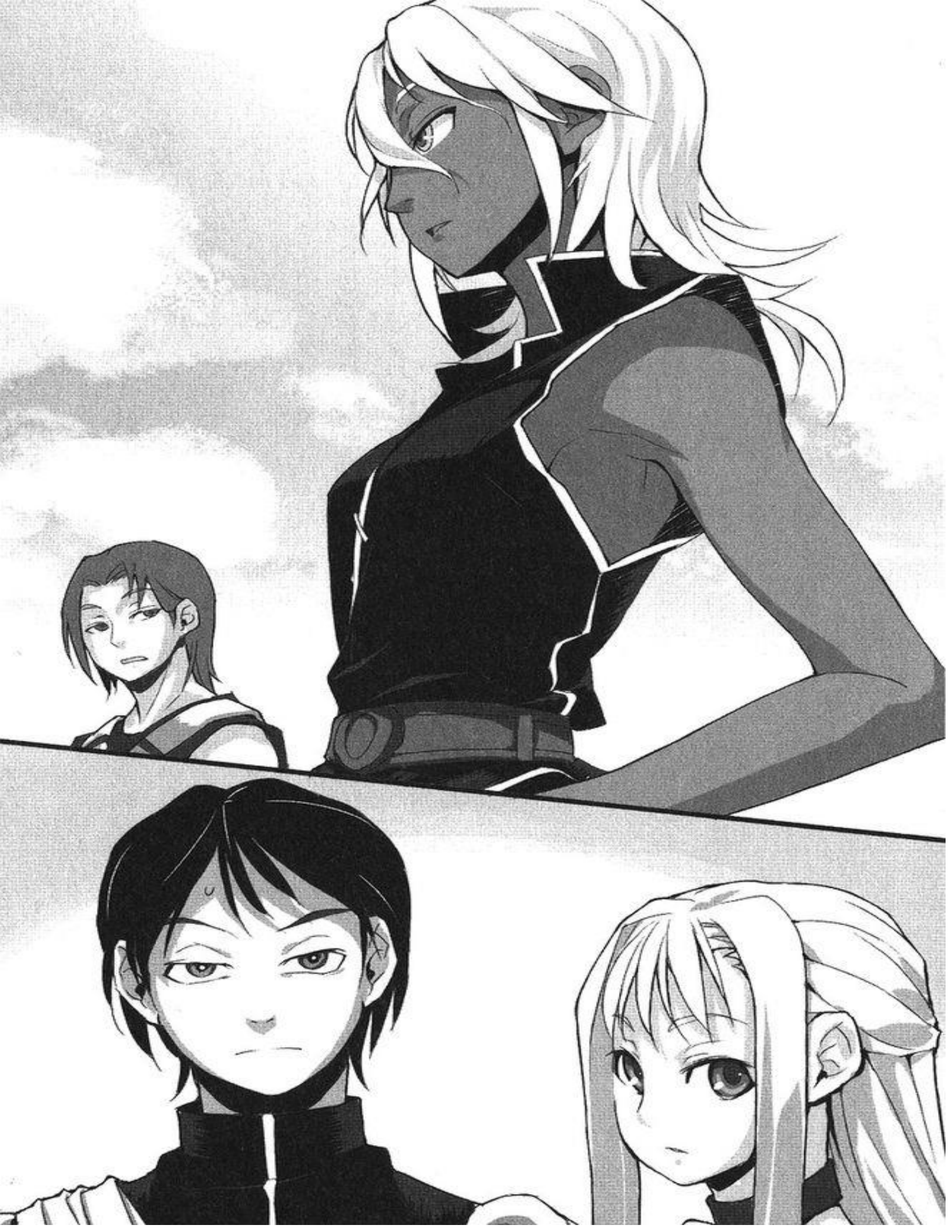
“A considerable amount of trust sure is placed on that swordsman. It was also the case at the founding festival, but it seems he has been tasked with several important duties this time as well.”

“Ah, yeah. He’s...handy.”

Orba gibbered, stealthily sneaking a glare at Ran’s direction. Vileena became slightly indignant.

“However, he appeared to have been injured a good deal from the arena. Although you yourself prince have also suffered injuries, how about you heed your subjects a bit more.”

“Uh, yeah, you’re right.”



“Despite how strong a person you yourself may be, that is not always the case for others. Above all, prince, your numbers mustn’t diminish any more. If you don’t allow them a word and only have them quietly obey you, no matter how fine a swordsman Orba is, even he will eventually...”

“Ha!”

At that moment, Ran snorted. For an instant, everyone was bewildered by the almost outright scorn. Who this was directed towards they did not know.

“Orba seems to be rather favoured by the princess.”

Her lips swerved into a thin, open smile, and then she turned her back, promptly returning to the dragon’s housing. Romus hurriedly chased after her, and Ronnie subsequently followed in a dash. Orba and everyone else saw them off stupefied.

“That young lady,” Theresia spoke shortly after adding in a cough, “isn’t she somewhat lacking in her manners? To act like that when the crown prince and Princess Vileena are present...”

“Ah. I’m truly ashamed. I apologize on behalf of my daughter’s discourtesy.”

The adopted father Gowen lowered his greying head. It was Orba’s first time seeing him bow down his large frame.

But Theresia also wasn’t truly angry. As evidence of that,

“That young lady,” she said once more, leaving a pause as if add weight, “Is she Sir Orba’s lover?”

“A-Absurd. —Why would you think that?”

“It is no such thing as absurd. I only felt that was how it was.”

“And I’m asking, why?”

“Now why, I wonder. I instead find the prince’s manner of disarray strangely odd. This might even be a harbinger of love for Sir Orba.”

Absurd! Orba muttered once more, facing away. He had known Hou Ran for over two years, but never noticed any attraction towards her. It might have been *because* he hadn’t, or that he *shouldn’t* have had any, that having this suddenly pointed out disturbed him.

For some time after, Orba and the others inattentively watched over the airship unit’s training. Shortly before the hour of noon, Vileena excused herself and Theresia from the platform. The princess would also be accompanying them to Apta. They had said there was still packing to be done.

When Orba finally thought he could take a breath of air, he overheard some unexpected words from Shique.

“The princess isn’t in too high of spirits is she.”

“Really? I don’t see any big difference from usual. If that’s her in low spirits, then the usual Vileena will be a far tougher opponent than Ryucown and Pashir.”

“Orba...right, you don’t understand the subtleties of women.”

“Does a misogynist have any right to say that?”

“It’s not that I hate them because I don’t understand them. It’s because I understand them too much that I hate them.”

Back at the days when he was a gladiator, Shique was exceptionally popular with women. There were many noblewomen piling up large sums of gold before the slave merchant Tarkas to be his patron. And to each and every one of them, Shique refused and snorted at them.

“Then again, it isn’t really that complicated. She probably knows about the rumours of ongoing tension between Garbera and Ende. Of course, she’s not a princess that wouldn’t grieve knowing of her home’s hardships.”

“It’s hard to say Garbera has fully recovered from Ryucown’s previous rebellion,” Gowen agreed. “It’s the same for Mephius, but at the least we were able to stop it before it occurred. To others, you could even say it’s been put out. But they experienced betrayal from one of their most famed generals. It’s certain to have a lasting effect.”

“I could care less about other countries’ troubles,” Orba promptly parted the remark. He then called the captain Neil back, bringing the training to an end. A separate unit was scheduled for training here after. With Pashir included, they consisted of the slaves from the recent rebellion whom Orba had added to his forces. Having once taken advantage of the opportunity provided by Zaat and attempting a rebellion, he could not just appoint them as regular soldiers and thus had designated them war slaves under the Imperial Guard’s command.

Orba had no business here. He had already earned the resentment of the slaves by having obstructed the rebellion, and had no intention of possibly aggravating them further by remaining to watch.

On this note, he entrusted their training to Gowen. A man originally a supervisor over sword slaves and versed in drills.

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Aah.”

Orba double-timed out of the parade ground.

Shique, who had stayed behind, took notice of Gowen’s sudden masked snicker.

“What’s the matter?”

“No, it’s just how he said ‘I’ll leave the rest to you.’ That damn little squirt’s position has sure changed in under two years.”

“And he’s gotten frightfully used to it too.”

“The weird one isn’t only him, but me who’s also grown used to these positions.”

“Yeah.” Shique strangely broke into a grin. “I’m no longer surprised by anything he says or does. If I don’t get used to that, it’ll only ruin my health.”

As Shique gave his agreement with a smile, Gowen watched Orba’s retreating figure in the distance.

“It would be good if it was only a problem of getting used to. Lately, he’s been devoting himself too much to being the crown prince.”

That single phrase, heard by no one, disappeared into the blowing sand and wind.

Solon saw the coming of noon.

Part 2

‘Emperor Guhl Mephius has stopped smiling.’ Orba had lost count how many times he had heard these murmurings inside the palace.

The former emperor often joked in front of his retainers and filled the halls with his jovial voice—he’d heard. Orba himself had only met with him a handful of times since pretending to be his actual son, so he didn’t know of this ‘former’ emperor.

Most notably, the emperor didn't so much as chuckle after Zaat's rebellion. His lips swerved into frowns, and he constantly rest his face against his hands in ill humour.

I get chills every time he looks at me.

These whispers he had also heard countlessly.

The emperor worked endlessly towards increasing the imperial family's—or more precisely, the emperor's—authority.

"There is no longer anyone who can make a single objection to His Majesty."

Fedom had muttered shortly before with a near trembling face.

"If these were vassals such as Colyne satisfied with readily following orders, that might be good in itself...however, for prideful nobles like myself who harbour the slightest thought for Mephius' future, should even that pride be considered a nuisance that we may be dismissed by the emperor, we might as well be dead."

There's Simon Rodloom.

Orba first conjured that name. At the time of the festival when Orba joined the emperor for breakfast, he had stated his own opinions without fear of the emperor. Whatmore, it was directly after Zaat had been confined.

If it's that man, wouldn't he fearlessly oppose the emperor without thought of personal gain or self-protection when necessary?

Hm?—

Orba twisted his lips, taken by these mysterious thoughts. He would have never believed himself to recognise a Mephian noble even a little bit as a person back when he was a gladiator.

Currently directly in front of Orba, his head bowed continuing his prayers with his eyes fixed on no particular point, was that very emperor, Guhl Mephius.

At the Black Tower, centre of the imperial capital of Solon.

The soldiers assigned as lookouts recognised Orba and gave a bow. They were his guide and proceeded towards the tower's underground. They passed by numerous people. They were half bare men carrying excavated rocks and rubble. Most were slaves or criminals.

In this underground was a certain Dragon God Mausoleum, currently in the midst of construction. While the Dragon God's Temple was being built in a location closer to the palace, the entirety of the mausoleum would be transferred here.

The emperor was ahead at their place of destination. He stood before an enormous carving depicting the Dragon God's form. This was the place they held the rituals to pray for abundant harvests directly before the festival had begun. This painting would also eventually be carved out and be established within the temple.

Orba politely gave words of greeting, but the emperor replied with only a grunt and nod, and occupied himself in issuing orders to the surrounding people.

He waited for a time—a long time.

Ten minutes must have passed, when the emperor stepped forth from the row of people. Orba once again lowered his head.

"I will set out the day after tomorrow."

“I see.”

The emperor passed by him showing no signs of stopping, but then suddenly halted and peered into Orba’s face.

“You’re growing more and more to resemble your mother.”

“Ha, hahah. I-Is that so?”

Even the famed gladiator found himself dripping in cold sweat. Then the emperor resumed walking again and Orba followed behind.

“It is not only your face. There are many who say you’ve changed into a different person, and it’s them following with such compliments as saying you’ve inherited my blood that irk me so.”

“I only received advice from my men.”

Behind and in front of them were Imperial Guards directly under the emperor assigned guard, but they kept their distance. Within the naturally chilly cave workings, the surroundings fell into an eerie silence as the voices and figures of the slaves grew further.

“Was that also the same with regards to Zaat? You happened to get advice from someone? Surely it wasn’t from me. I wasn’t given a single notice.”

“Yes. N-no, I mean—the one who planned it was me. Only, I was somewhat uneasy over my own thoughts and went to Fedom to receive his wisdom. However, I had consulted him without mentioning Zaat’s name, nor informing him of the situation’s urgency, merely as an assumption,” Orba quickly replied.

“And whose suggestion was it to purposely aim at the time of Zaat’s rebellion? Had I been immediately notified, I could have quietly subdued Zaat without the ambassadors and guests from abroad noticing.”

The emperor stopped walking. There was no path ahead, only a cliff looming 50 metres tall. The dim light of a single candle placed on the walls flickered over the shadow cast on the emperor's face.

"I do not plan to excuse myself for my actions. I wanted...an accomplishment that would make me be recognized by many. I didn't consider the lives of the soldiers and ambassadors—It was thoughtless of me. I beg your forgiveness."

"That's wrong, isn't it?"

The emperor flatly concluded. He refaced Orba, who took a deep gulp.

"No, it *is* wrong. You don't trust in *me*."

"I-I wouldn't—"

"You only wanted an accomplishment? If there is a part of you that has changed, it's how you would even dare mouth such as insolent excuse towards me above all."

The recesses of his eyes reflected the colour of the flames, and seemed to wrap around his body and soul like a snake. Orba said nothing, only shamefully lowering his head."

"I see. So a dragon's child is a dragon. For we imperials who succeed the blood of the Dragon God Mephius, it may be that even you cannot forever stay a dragonling."

The word's echo held neither conceit nor scorn. The emperor walked towards Orba who continued facing down.

"However, it seems you take much more strongly after your mother than I. It's not only your face, but your character. In the end you stray from the Mephius imperial customs and are unable to open you heart to me; you've inherited that frail trait."

After gazing into his face one last time, he passed his shoulder.

“Very well. If you’ve begun to sprout a dragon’s wings, then I’ll have you match up to that expectation and keep Ax Bazgan in place. After two weeks, Oubary’s forces shall join yours. If it’s to protect the fortress alone, those forces should be more than sufficient.”

Oubary.

At that moment, a single hot flame lit within Orba’s chilled heart.

Amongst the forces Orba was bringing to Apta, there would also be fifty men borrowed from Oubary’s Black Helmet Division. Oubary himself would be dispatched to the southeastern parts of Mephius along with his 500 men. Several days after Zaat’s rebellion, slaves revolted in the southeastern Kiluro, and he had been tasked with suppressing them.

During the uproar at the Grand Stadium, Oubary had disappeared quite quickly, resulting in doubts and animosity from the emperor and statesmen. It had therefore become hard for him to stay in Solon and he also likely wanted to use this to wipe clean his bad name.

“Use them as you please. You may wield your powers as commander to your heart’s content. In return, I won’t have any complaint no matter the circumstance. Either way, you consider me beneath your notice. Any worry would be meaningless.”

The emperor receded away from Orba into the distance along with his ringing echo, this time it being rich in ridicule. Orba breathed a sigh of relief, grateful he had somehow managed to end this without his identity being exposed. At the same time, an unfamiliar feeling passed him.

Are fathers...

Are all fathers meant to be like this? That they hate and deplore their own sons—or is it because they are nobles that they’re so strange.

Orba held no memories of his father. However, he did know the faces of everyone in his home village. There were a mountain of adults that looked after him like a father. There were those who severely scolded his troublemaker self, and then also those who laughed, telling him how they were also the same in the past. Back during those days, Orba thought they were all annoying, but now having lost even that, he found the memories even a little nostalgic.

“Father.”

Urged by the heated flame lit within him, Orba suddenly called out to the emperor.

“What?”

Turning around, his face displayed a candid annoyance. Orba slowly raised his downturned eyes.

“If I may ‘use them as I please’, then I take it you don’t mind if I use those forces to take Ax’s head.”

“What?”

“And on the break of that dawn that I may also have the fortress city Taúlia Ax occupies.”

A still, heavy silence weighed on Orba’s shoulders.

Some tens of seconds later,

“You nitwit!”

The emperor shouted as loud as permitted him. And then he burst into a welling laughter.

“You nitwit, I said you could do as you pleased. Go ahead! I’d like to see this dunce of a dragonling that can barely flap his wings try!”

Because of standing rumours that the emperor had stopped smiling, even the distant imperial soldiers had come running in surprise at the sound of his bursting laughter. Stopping them with the raise of his hand, the emperor gave a further sneer and departed.

In the little remaining time before his departure, Orba was drowned in the flood of documents, books, and papers delivered to his room.

These documents listed the names of the commanding officers and captains amongst the soldiers accompanying him. Amongst the members of the Black Helmet Division was Bane's name. He was someone Orba had incidentally requested when speaking with the assistant commander of the Black Helmet Division over the party's formation. At that time, the date for Oubary's main forces to set out was also drawing near, and any conflicting opinions being a waste of time may have been why it was easily agreed to.

In terms of ability, Bane was nothing much. Over the course of six years, his position had stopped at captain, meaning he most likely earned barely any achievements in the ten year war. But for Orba, there was reason for his irrepressible want for him.

And amongst the war slaves, Pashir's name was of course present. In the days following the founding festival's 'Clovis' Dragon Extermination' Orba had not met him once, but according to Gowen's testimony, he was obediently undergoing practice and drills at the time being. Also present, as the war slaves' steward, was the name of Mira, who'd also attended the sword slaves at Solon's grand stadium.

The rest he roughly glanced over. At the end of the list were the names of aspiring applicants that either wanted to join Orba's forces or take on

administrative roles in Apta. The majority were of noble descent; names of poor nobles or late sons of prestiged houses.

“Even though they’re the same nobles, they seem to each have their own circumstances.”

The chamberlain, Dinn, brought over a fresh batch of books to him.

“My arms are already swollen.” The boy winced from looking at the mountain of books stacked high in the room.

“Don’t tell me you plan on training even me and sending me out to the battlefield.”

“You said it.”

Orba took a newly delivered book into his hand and flipped through its pages. It contained mostly the histories of countries neighbouring Mephius and compiled summaries of their current state and situation.

After what happened with Noue and Zaat, Orba fully realised he had absolutely no knowledge on these matters. Information was crucial in battles. He had experienced this first hand in his childhood days, and since then Orba always wanted to gather as much information on hand as possible. Of course, storing up information alone wasn’t enough, but having information provided from others’ thoughts and perspectives would affect the very breadth of his thinking.

“What about *that*? There’s little of the vital information.”

“Do you mean of the current state of Taúlia and the western provinces? I’ve also been looking for them in as many ways as possible. What currently exist are only second hand copies based on a few books originating from countries to the northern coast. I admit even these books are outdated.”

“Why?”

“Mephian trade with the western world—in other words, the Tauran provinces—is banned. The former Zer Tauran was a country raised by the Bazgans, once Mephian vassals. Even now after Zer Tauran’s collapse, the Bazgan House continues to skirmish with us, and the other provinces are also ruled by Zer Tauran successors.”

“But even then...no, it’s for this reason that he should at least send tens or even a hundred spies over.”

“Please say that directly to His Majesty. I have nothing to do with it.”

“If speaking directly with him would have had any effect, I would’ve learned everything I needed to from the start.”

Orba further flipped through the pages.

Strange.

Feeling an inconsistency, he stopped his hands.

It wasn’t about how the emperor hadn’t handed him information on the west.

“Trade with the west is banned? How many years ago was this?”

“More than years, it should be decades, or even over a century. I don’t believe we ever signed a ceasefire or peace treaty since the Zer Tauran days.”

“Reeaalllyy.”

Closing the book, Orba stretched his legs over the table. “Here you go again,” Dinn reprimanded but Orba did not budge. Once he started thinking, he would not break from the forest of thoughts until he came up with his own solution.

Dinn had grown used to it.

“Come along now, prince. Before you turn silent from your thoughts, please state what foods you would prefer. The palace master chef should take even more time, and I’ll have you know I won’t take ‘Anything’s fine’ for an answer!”

Dinn could do nothing but perform his own duties to his best.

Part 3

The Solon west gates bustled with crowds coming to see off Prince Gil and his troops.

The group of cavaliers moving headfirst waved their spearflags while responding to the people’s cheers with waves of their hands.

Amongst those selected within the Imperial Guards was Shique. With vexingly good looks for a man, the refreshing figure of him mounted on his horse had particularly fanned the women and children’s heated cries.

As the dragoons under Oubary and the artillerymen under Odyne Lorgo went, the carriage carrying Princess Vileena came into sight along with the clattering sounds of its wheels. The joyous cheers as Vileena smiled and waved her hands out the window were noticeably high.

And as a new group of horsemen appeared behind as if guarding her rear, the streets were filled with a series of stirs different from previous ones.

Saddled on his gallant white horse, was Mephius’ crown prince Gil Mephius. His silver armour lavishly reflected the sun’s rays as if emitting a powerful radiance. And contrastively to his side was a black horse. Mounted was the iron masked gladiator. The pair was sent a frenzied applause.

“Gil-sama!”

“Prinncccee!”

“Look, it’s the ‘Clovis’, Orba!”

The combination of the young prince who rescued the country from a rebellion and his faithful masked warrior was a story worth passing down and heightened their popularity amongst the people.

Gil had limited himself to releasing one hand from the reins and lightly raising it, but Orba, probably unable to withstand the storm of cheers, wildly waved both arms, and suddenly stood straight up with both feet on the stirrup while having his horse do a light jump. Because the response was tremendous, he got carried away and did it multiple times, and in the end was nearly about to slip off the stirrup and fall.

“You idiot!” The mounted Gil—of course, this was the real Orba—shouted at him with a flushed face. “Behave yourself.”

The scolded Orba—the Imperial Guard Kain, who could also be said to be Orba’s body double—dejectedly dropped his shoulders. The cheers completely turned into a downpour of laughter.

“Well, I guess this could also be a form of extravagant publicity as we set out.”

Above the ramparts enclosing the gates was also the figure of Fedom Aulin.

He was the lord of Birac, but ever since he had disguised Orba as the prince, he had yet to return to his land even once. Although his family had also come to Solon for the festival, even when it was time for his wife and children to go back, he had insisted on staying in Solon, saying ‘I still have work to be done’.

“The prince has raised his name from his campaign against Ryucown and the incident with Zaat.” A tall young man, who at a glance appeared to be

a boarder, whispered to him from beside. “This trend will make a good impetus for the people. It also denotes the continuation of the imperial family’s dignity.”

“Hmph—There are other ways if they care about their dignity. Look at those troops. They appear to be keeping their interval, but in the end they’re a poorly patched bunch. Former sword slaves acting as imperial guards, war slaves that had only recently attempted rebellion, and a mere hundred nominated soldiers; if an army from Taúlia truly marched in at full might, forget a month, it’s unlikely they’d even last three days.”

Fedom did not see eye to eye with the rumours regarding Ax Bazgan’s suspicious movements. If the emperor Guhl was fully certain that Ax would come attack Apta then he would have reinforced the army a bit more.

I can’t imagine he would let him die this openly without batting an eye.

Fedom bitterly clicked his tongue as he heard the yet unceasing cheers towards Prince Gil. What set him impatient now most above all was the piece of news that claimed Guhl’s second wife Melissa was pregnant. It was no more than a rumour whispered within the palace, but if it were to be true, then he would change his stand on how he viewed this treatment towards the prince.

Curse you Guhl. Do you intend to distance the prince who has gained a rise in popularity from the centre of politics?

He was irritated. Fedom Aulin was the perpetrator who had concealed the death of the actual Gil Mephius and set up the former gladiator Orba as a substitute. Of course, this was a large crime that if discovered would sentence his entire family and all those serving him to death. He continued his days coming off nights of insufficient sleep rushed by an impatience to get things done even a day sooner.

However, because Fedom originally took the stance of the anti-imperial faction, he required a different faction that would support the prince. He would have to gather those discontented towards the current emperor and *not* towards the very system of imperials, and who dreamed of advancement through a new order established under Prince Gil—a strengthened rectification of the country's foundation, so to speak—if he did not want to end up like Ryucown who invested his life into a futureless rebellion.

Now, when things were finally beginning to take shape after discreetly taking ventures, and on a few occasions with ones dire enough to chill him down to his marrow, that Prince Gil was to be sent far off to the outlands that was also as well the country's borders.

Naturally, he was not going to give up from this. In Fedom's eyes, it might even be a good thing if a battle occurred at Apta once. Were the emperor to hesitate sending reinforcements during the prince's crisis, then that would serve a common cause that might make it possible to remove the emperor from his seat.

The two weeks before Oubary's forces join them will be the determiner, will it.

Then Fedom's concern was on Orba who was more than likely to go off acting on his own and completely disregard his distresses. Then again, there *was* the difference in strength of forces and to add, his own forces were a cobbled together band that he could scarcely hope to take command of, so he shouldn't really be able to move about as he pleased.

"Still—that rascal, he parted with some strange words."

Directly before he departed, Orba had made Fedom an odd request. His troops would continue moving towards Apta by foot, it seemed. 'I'd like you to let our flagship Doom temporarily anchor in Birac,' Orba said.

“I’ll also leave a few winged dragon officers along with it. You can just leave the ship as is. They’ll move the ship when I’ll need it.”

“Why would you again do something so tedious?”

“It’s the thing called preparation. Don’t worry, just because you won’t be there doesn’t mean I’ll stop being his body double. The real prince should be remaining in Solon either way. I don’t know who’s targeting him, but you might as well look after him.”

“You seem to have grown quite fond of this game of war, prince.”

Fedom was busy carrying out his own plans.

“Be sure not to let your schemes get the better of you. If all you’re going to do is fortify the fortress’ defences, I won’t say a word. But just you try running rampant with your arbitrary actions and exceeding my patience. At that time...”

“I get it, Lord Fedom Aulin.”

Orba smiled lightly. Fedom had, to be honest, felt a shudder from that smile.

He resembles him, he had thought.

Not the real Gil Mephius. Instead, that moment Fedom felt him the splitting image of the father, Guhl Mephius, despite his appearance being entirely the same as Gil.

Before long the troops exited the gate and the cheers gradually came to a halt.

Fedom also began to leave and quickly called out to the young man who stood at the same spot as him.

“What’s wrong, Hermann. Is there something you’re uneasy about?”

The magician servant, gently turned his head.

The man's face was expressionless, and Fedom had long been unable to read him. Though there were times he appeared a young man, depending on the angle of lighting, there were times he appeared to far exceed Fedom in age. Fedom perked his fleshy shoulders.

"We also have a mountain of preparations to do. Many of them will require your insight. For the time being I won't forgive you going off on your own."

"I do understand, milord."

Hermann lightly nodded, but, as he was about to make his leave, he cast his glance once more across the walls towards the road the prince and his troops departed on.

"Hmm."

He murmured in a small voice inaudible to even Fedom.

"'His' fate is certainly to move largely riding the 'gale'. That speed is faster than my eyes can grasp."

But—Oh my.

How strange. The 'gale' is certainly blowing and I can unmistakably see its direction. But the destination of the crucial 'he'—this single future step, is darkly shut. What could this possibly—?

In this time of the year, Solon's skies were clear. The untempered sunlight shone on the prince and his party's armour and the resulting row of bending lights faded into the distance. Not too long after, they could no longer be seen from even the tallest of Solon's towers.

“Have they gone?”

As for the emperor Guhl, he had not even gone to see them off and spent the entire time in his personal room performing various miscellaneous tasks.

“Yes.”

The one responding was the former council president, Simon Rodloom.

“The prince is certainly in high spirits. He has unmistakably put his all in adorning his men in uniform.”

“He’s still a child, that one.”

“I quite enjoy it. Rather, it is by outstripping those childish traits one by one that he can steadily climb the steps towards adulthood.”

“You are patient,” the emperor grunted. ”In politics and in parenting both. What will you do about the problem of Rodloom house’s successor?”

“Well,”

Simon smiled bashfully.

He had two daughters; both of which were already married. Normally one would have entered one of the two husbands into the family register, but Simon had yet to decide. He had no particular qualms about their pedigree or personality but…

“I’m afraid if I rush the decision, I’ll grow old all at once.”

“How like you, Simon.”

The emperor nodded in assent without so much a laugh.

Is His Majesty tired?

Sometimes his emotions were fierce, such that they were as glaring as the Dragon God's vigour, and just as frequently, sometimes his responses were like a completely withered flame.

"Two days back, if I remember correctly," the emperor spoke, taking the chance to close his eyes, "Princess Vileena petitioned for an audience. What reason do you think for?"

"What could it be?...The case between Ende and Garbera, perhaps?"

"That may be. However, she did not touch on it with a single word and expressed her intent to give a farewell greeting. At the end she declared, 'In the near future, my fathers will number two. May you watch over your health.'"

—

In the situation something were to happen to Garbera, how would the allied Mephius move? Thoughts within the imperial court in regards to that were quite varied. As for Vileena, she had likely said it with the implied meaning 'should that time come I pray you will come to Garbera's aid'.

"A princess, brave and able to take action. Thoughts wishing Gil had even a fragment of her capacity have also crossed my mind."

"Your Majesty..."

"I will admit that Gil has grown in his own way. However, he cannot hope to carry the burden of the country as he is. To be a ruler is to sometimes see black as white; to listen to all things but also to not show hesitation against dissent; to speak one's own words from the very start."

“There is no one who can lead from the start. Not even the greatest of monarchs and heroes written down in history. I’m afraid to say, Your Majesty, it is not that I am patient, but that you are impatient.”

“I may not have been a good father. I shall also admit to that.”

The emperor said as if to put an end their conversation, perhaps finding it to have taken an unpleasant turn.

There were a mountain of things Simon wanted to discuss with the emperor that needed to be said directly. The case of the Dragon God Shrine was also one of them. But he realised that what stood before him was like a heavy leaden wall, that no matter what words he tried to put forth, they would only rebound.

Can you no longer believe in anyone, Guhl?

He called out to his old friend internally.

I see, to be a ruler is to live in solitude. As Simon looked along the deep wrinkles, so deep almost as if someone carved them into him, and his whitened hair and beard, he saw an aged emperor weary from a long period of solitude, but who was at the same time very stubborn and refusing to separate from his chair.

It might be that he’s afraid.

The flash of realisation suddenly hit him. This owed to the emperor’s current appearance, face down and attentively cleaning up the paperwork, being comparable to that of a small, frail old man.

Afraid of himself who has stopped being an emperor, and his own son who he has stopped loving, be he fool or not. Or perhaps—

There was no way Simon Rodloom could not be familiar with the fatigue of someone having engaged in the country's politics for a long time. Simon believed this may have been a premonition of things to come.

Rule mustn't continue to be entrusted to the hands of the weary. Old blood must eventually be replaced by new blood. Should that time be mistaken, the country will be eaten away by disease from within and before long, perish.

Chapter 2: Birac's Illustrious Merchant

Part 1

Birac was Mephius' second capital. Its plateaus were separated into layers spread across a gorge. The upper layer was lined with white marble buildings clearly designated for the upper echelons, and the lower layer consisted of houses standing directly before the cliff for the common class.

In the upper class layer's eastern districts, the Zwimm River flowed directly through. Day in and day out, great numbers of barges passed through this spot serving as a trading point with the various nations to the north. Business flourished. People from the other countries were also seen in large numbers.

Prince Gil, leading his troops, came to this city.

It was thought that he had come here to rest and would immediately leave for Apta. However it had already been three days since he first entered Birac and the prince still showed no signs of lifting his sluggish back up.

"Did you hear? The prince's soldiers received a fair share of spending money from the prince and are off to their own dallying every night."

"It seems that they acted out of hand in Yulia's store. I've heard it was because there weren't any girls they liked."

"Speaking of Prince Gil, you know, he's famous for being a dimwit. He's recently raised his name from subjugating Ryucown's forces and stopping Zaat's rebellion, but as expected, this isn't normal."

Such news and rumours also reached Birac merchant Zaj Haman's ears countlessly.

“That type of man is scariest to deal with. He doesn’t follow common sense, you see. He’s exactly like a baby dragon, how the moment you think it has grown accustomed to people, it turns around and bites you the next instant. You can only pray it doesn’t come true,” Zaj said and shot out a candid laugh.

The merchants making up a significant portion of Birac’s population were self-regulating, and didn’t fear the imperials and nobles that constituted Mephius’ aristocrats any more than necessary. Of course, this didn’t mean they made light of the nobles, but this possibly being a unique trait of the merchants, they were more than willing to take up arms to protect their body and assets if they found themselves forced into nothing but undesirable conditions, even if it came to opposing the aristocrats.

“Won’t your business proceed smoothly regardless of what happens?”

“Surely not! Negligence is your greatest enemy. It only takes an instant for everything to fall apart without exception.”

Zaj was past his sixties, and even now frequented the store to show his face and stop by for a friendly chat over a drink. His business handled many clients that came from other towns and countries. If Zaj suspected the information he wanted was present amongst these clients, he would listen to their long, unending conversations even if it happened to be their first time meeting.

The illustrious merchant, Zaj Haman.

There were none in Birac who did not know his name. He was the man who owned the transport enterprise founded within the prosperous Birac, which yielded upwards of forty percent in profits, whose ships, engraved with the emblem of the Haman Firm, had continuously taken off from and returned to Port Birac to this day.

In the first place, businesses that used air carriers in Mephius were rare. Ether, the source of energy of these airships, was acquired from the vaporization of seawater using artefacts of ancient civilization. Mephius not being connected to any bodies of water made the securing of ether, particularly for the general populace, difficult. Unless it was an urgent matter, transport of goods by air carrier was typically not worth the payout.

However, Zaj Haman, having gone to Garbera to study in his earlier years and learned the ins and outs of operating airships, established Birac as a waypoint between the nearby coastal regions and pioneered an exclusive trading route with the northern floating city of Zavinia. The waters surrounding Zavinia were known for their high concentrations of ether, and even now, sales of the ether alone were said to finance the entire country's economy.

The sovereign of Zavinia, General Kal Lighthel, had quickly become known for his cross personality, but Zaj crossed the waters to pay him visit thrice through which he secured a personal relationship with him.

Zaj saw not only to business with the populace, but also took to replenishing the army's reserves during times of war. And in this year's founding festival as well, on the occasion of the naval review where the number of readily available ships were few—and where the number of ships contributed was said to correspond to status—Zaj had loaned out ships to a good number of nobles for a small sum.

That is to say, his connections with the nobles also ran deep.

And also part of Zaj's renown was how he hired people regardless of birthplace or nationality. The nationally diverse people he put to work and the also many people who went in and out of his store made collecting information easy. And in turn, there were also many merchants and servants of nobles who visited his store to buy this information,

resulting in rumours going as far as to claim that Zaj Haman might in fact have more authority than Birac's feudal lord Fedom Aulin.

"As for that Prince Gil," Zaj inquired of a worker in a room on the second floor as he ate a late lunch meal.

"What is that prince in question doing here in Birac? Is he staying here long so he can have fun with any women he takes a liking to?"

"Now that you mention it…" the worker inclined his head. "We've frequently seen and also heard rumours of his soldiers doing this, but haven't seen anything indicating this of the prince. Isn't he simply idling around in Lord Aulin's residence?"

"Hmph."

To be honest, Gil Mephius proved elusive even for Zaj. Him not having a firm command over his soldiers and his overstaying his visit in Birac certainly went alongside rumours dubbing him a fool, but if that were the case, then sure enough it raised into question his role in the defeat of Ryucown on his first campaign and ability in holding Zaat's rebellion in check.

Zaj spent nearly his whole lifetime bringing up the Haman Firm.

He found it hard to believe these stories that told of a fool who suddenly turned hero. His belief that this was a made-up story created in order to make Prince Gil seem more suitable as successor to the throne remained firm.

And there's also the information that Birac's feudal lord, Fedom, has recently started getting close to Prince Gil. It'd be no surprise for that man to back the prince and scheme to pull the strings from behind. However, it's a tad too late to do that now. Perhaps the emperor's health suddenly worsened, or perhaps some other man of importance had suggested

'that' to Fedom, but there must have been some change that occurred to cause this.

Though Zaj held great interest regarding this topic, he was ultimately a merchant. He had neither intentions of sticking his head too deep into matters of imperial succession, nor plans to take advantage of this opportunity.

That evening,

“M-My lord!”

One of his workers came running in gasping.

“What is it? You’re causing a ruckus.” Raising his grey-haired head, Zaj grimaced.

He was overwhelmed with work every day. Now as well, he was in the middle of planning out the establishment of a new Haman Firm intermediary airship base in a village along the road connecting Birac to Apta, which had transferred back to Mephius.

“T-There’s a customer. He insists on meeting with you, my lord.”

“Won’t Bart do?”

Bart was Zaj’s second son. Zaj entrusted the first floor of the store and the handling of the importation of general goods to the son and his wife.

The worker shook his head.

“Who exactly is this so-called guest?”

It couldn’t be that this was part of a garrison raid, could it? As Zaj began to knit his brows, an unexpected name rung in his ears.

“Why, I’m most pleased to welcome you here. I would have never possibly imagined your grace would set foot in a place like this. If there had been prior notice, I would have been able to quickly prepare a more appropriate welcome,” Zaj said with a smile while rubbing his hands.

He by no means allowed his inner unrest to show on his face.

This *guest* was curiously examining the goods of the store he took into his hands.

“I don’t mind. I wasn’t expecting a warm reception,” Orba gave an amenable nod.

“Please excuse me as I go prepare some tea.”

Zaj, while smiling, devoted his whole attention to observing the guest.

The Mephius Imperial Dynasty’s Crown Prince, Gil.

His height wasn’t too prominent but his darkish skin and lean figure denoted a body belonging to a soldier, and above all, the fleeting glance cast his way was surprisingly sharp. Zaj did not see anywhere the man rumoured a fool. However it was also common for impressions of people based on appearances to differ from the actual contents.

This is.....but what could the prince himself have possibly come here for?

He had suddenly shown up together with a soldier whose looks could be mistaken for a woman’s. If he had only come here to shop, then dealing with his son Bart should have more than sufficed. Zaj prayed nothing would happen on some ridiculous whim, but he feared that exact possibility would bear fruit.

“I thought I’d come here for a small chat. You see, I heard information on various countries could be bought here with money.”

“Whether it be goods or information, I handle them all. You could call it the trade of a merchant. It’s quite the bothersome trait. When asked ‘Do you have it?’ we cannot readily say ‘I do not’. That is why day in and day out we search high and low through all means possible, but as expected, I fear as to whether our services may satisfy the expectations of a prince.”

“It’s nothing much,” Orba spoke as he took out a pocket watch from the shelf and examined it. “You’re aware of where I’m heading to, right?”

“Apta Fortress.”

“That’s right. And opposite there, is Ax Bazgan situated in the west. To get straight to the point, I want information on Ax Bazgan. I want information of all the territory comprising the former Zer Tauran, and that includes information on the Tauran Provinces.”

“Gil-sama,” Zaj began without changing his expression.

“Trade in Mephius with the west is strictly forbidden. Directly obtaining information on them is somewhat difficult. Tomorrow, I am expecting visitors from the northern coastal nations and I can see what information I can get, but with what I have at present...”

“So you *don’t* have it?”

“At present.....no.”

There was a short pause. Gil was, still as ever, examining the pocket watch. The surrounding slaves and workers nervously sent occasional glances as they watched the exchange.

It turned out to be a whim after all.

Zaj harboured this thought within. Didn’t he only happen to hear rumours about the Haman Firm and deciding to test it out, show up

here? In that case, Zaj would keep him company, greatly disappoint him, and then have him sent home packing his bags.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m sorry?”

Gil’s expression also didn’t change. Smiling thinly, he looked up away from the watch.

“Why do you think I went out of my way to come here? Zaj Haman. You should be engaging in those forbidden transactions with the west.”

“I beg to differ that—”

“I don’t need your small talk,” Gil Mephius firmly stated. “*I* believe it to be true. That makes it unquestionable. There’s no need for me to establish further proof, nor do I have any intention of purposely declaring it. You *get* what I’m saying, right?”

“.....”

Maintaining his expression, Zaj felt a faint shiver creep down him.

At that time, a servant brought a drink over. Zaj refused it. He opened his mouth and carefully spoke.

“If you have the time, why don’t we go outside together?”

Zaj and Gil Mephius headed towards one of the warehouses owned by the Haman Firm in the harbour.

Along the way, Zaj touched on Prince Gil’s glorious feats and gave praise to them, but the prince had not even offered a simple reply. Casting a

sidelong glance at the bronze barges traversing in and out of the port, they entered an all but inconspicuous warehouse.

“I’m sorry to trouble you to come all the way out here.”

They proceeded towards the third floor, which turned into a simple office. Zaj personally set up cups on the table and poured fruit wine in them.

I wouldn’t be surprised if the wall spun around and soldiers came flying out right about now.

Gil Mephius—his real identity being Orba—chuckled.

Though he knew of the illustrious merchant Zaj Haman’s name, he had no plans of visiting him of course, until just shortly before his departure from Mephius. However, when he found out about the trade ban with the west, Orba noticed something was off. As he searched for the reason within his memories, he hit on that fine point.

Oh right.

Orba had been in none other than this Birac. With the succeeding villages burned down by Oubary’s troops immediately after Apta had fallen, the city he scrambled to arrive at was this very Birac.

There, taking the role of leading the boys, he passed four years robbing and running an illegal gambling house.

And just as Orba was doing now, he spread out the boys who acted as his eyes and ears, when he caught wind of a certain piece of information. A small fleet of air carriers loaded with golden nuggets and goods were being readied at the harbour. Nonetheless, this wasn’t listed on the port authority listing of flights. The Haman Firm likely bribed the authorities, planning to stealthily sneak off late into the night.

If it's like this, it won't be reported to the Birac garrison even if I attack it.

Thinking this, Orba set up a plan to attack those merchant ships. And while he was advancing his preparations, one of the boys belonging to the rival group that slipped in amongst his subordinates reported him.

And then I was imprisoned.

Indeed, it was in this very Birac, where Orba's planned assault on the merchant ships was revealed and his various other crimes exposed, resulting in the engraving of the slave's brand onto his back and a situation that forced him into wearing the mask.

What a strange coincidence.

Orba leisurely approached the window, belying the cautious guard he kept over his back. Making use of the incident that resulted in his imprisonment, he was now meeting with the top man of the Haman Firm as Prince Gil. And what he wanted now, more than anything, was information Zaj Haman was holding.

Then, a single small bird flew down on the windowsill. It's body covered with light brown feathers, it pecked its bill.

"Those feathers once used to be a brilliant yellow."

"Hm?"

Standing behind him, Haman respectfully offered a cup of wine, which Orba received.

"It's among the merchandise we've brought in from across the globe. But having grown in age, it's colour has faded. However, it's vibrant voice alone hasn't changed in the slightest. Though its appearance has changed, its songs do not forget it's birthplace—as versed men like to say."

“Oh?”

Orba concentrated his ears. Its chirps had reached his ears countless times but he hadn’t found himself particularly moved in any way. Though now that Zaj mentioned it, Orba could somewhat feel the perpetual flow of time in its songs.

“It’s a shame it never gets to the crucial part.”

“Ah–“

With a light flap of its wings, the bird stood up and flew away.

“Now then,” Zaj spoke, returning to the original topic of the conversation. “What do you need from me?”

“It won’t change by having me repeat it. I want information.”

“Your Imperial Highness. This is not the palace nor do you possess a peerless number of troops here. It is especially in places like these that I hold more influence, more so than you or Lord Fedom. It might be too much for a young prince to understand, but even places like this exist in the world.”

“A threatening reprisal, is it?”

“It is only speculation. I could even kidnap you here and offer you to another country. Rather than continuing business in Mephius, I’m sure some country could prepare a far greater sum.”

Orba never drank from the cup handed to him. The same also went for Shique, so it was their end that spoke more frankly of their caution. After a short time passed, Orba spoke in bits.

“That wouldn’t be worth your while.”

“Worth my while?”

“Ax Bazgan has been a thorn in Mephius’ side for a long time. If that threat were to be taken away, you’d be able to freely do trade. Ah right, what do you say to leaving over half of the trading route in your hands?”

“Wh-What are you...”

Zaj instinctively cleared his throat. He thought to laugh it off for a second but Gil Mephius’ face was serious.

This man...

If he was seriously saying this, then he’d be far from the spoken fool unworthy to be a successor. He’d be a seldom seen idiot.

“...Unfortunate to say, your highness’ forces do not amount to much. More than ten years ago, his imperial majesty sent a force ten times yours to attack Taúlia. Of course, I’m sure you’re more than aware of the outcome. Ax Bazgan does not have such a huge force. But though the remnants of the former Zer Tauran may be undergoing civil strife, they are strangely cooperative towards outside enemies. What is it that your highness can possibly do in the face of a force rivalling Mephius’?”

“You’ve gotten rather talkative.”

It was proof of his true intentions, was what Orba was implying.

“Your highness.”

“I’ll admit that what I have is definitely small. It’s *because* of that that I want your information. Not old, moldy information but fresh information that you hold.”

“You’re saying if you have that, you could even bring down Taúlia?”

“How long have you been deceiving the Mephian nobles’ eyes and performing trade with the west?”

Orba responded with another question. Unable to regain hold of the conversation, Zaj had little choice but to be upfront.

“...Let’s say it’s been going on for seven years.”

“Would you rather have it end at seven years or would you rather have it run even more smoothly for another ten, twenty years?”

Ah, Zaj leaked out. In that instant, Orba drained his cup of its entire contents.

“I’ll ask you one more time, merchant of Birac.” Orba asked as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Do you *have* the information I want?”

Zaj felt his head swoon as he looked at the prince in front of him. His impression of him as an idiot hadn’t changed. However, if it were the meaning that defined an idiot...

“I do,” Zaj nodded and also drank his whole cup. He slammed the cup onto the table.

“On second thought, there won’t be a need for a second helping. I still don’t know if the information will be of any help to the prince. If it were to help you accomplish what you need, then by all means...”

Part 2

Zaj had ordered a slave seeming to be a warehouseman to bring over a map, and spread it out on the table.

Pointing to the region of Zer Tauran in the west, he began speaking of its old history. Regarding the story of the Zerdian’s history, Orba also held a certain degree of knowledge from a book he read before he set off.

Afterwards, Zaj opened a map narrowing to the Apta outskirts.

Apta and Taúlia were cut off by the Yunos River running along the north and south. The fast streaming, expansive river served as the border. Apta Fortress was built above a cliff positioned by the river. Hence, the chances of Ax Bazgan advancing east were exceedingly slim.

“I won’t say there is no path to climb up the cliff, but in that time, there’d be nothing helping them avoid the fortress’ line of fire and they’d be completely defenceless. And, according to my reasoning, Taúlia likely has no dreadnought-class airship in its possession. It can at best manage a cruiser-class ship, carrying some 200-300 soldiers. However, I don’t believe they’d directly commence an attack from the visible sky.”

“This—would be the Tsaga Mines, huh.”

Looking at the spot Orba pointed out, Zaj flashed a grin. Roughly ten kilometres south of Apta, the river was broken by a series of mountains. In the past, this was known as the place where slaves and criminals were forced to work.

“Tragically harsh boundless labour, poisonous gases, wild dragons, and man-hunting geblin tribes—”

Orba had also relentlessly heard those words from the slave trader Tarkas. ‘If you don’t listen to me, I’ll toss you there,’ or so he’d been threatened. In short, it was a place that would even make the murderous, short-lived purchased slaves flinch.

If I remember right, Pashir also worked in this mine.

With the incident where Apta had been taken, it should have been shut down now. It was once said to have an abundance of resources, but thinking on how Garbera also hadn’t laid its hands on it, there shouldn’t be anyone currently willing to go as far as take the risk of mining there.

“So what that would mean, Haman...is that your ships pass through *here*.”

“Exactly,” Zaj lowered his white brows and broke into a smile. “There are dragons and geblins on the ground, but that doesn’t matter when you’re in the air. Well, in order to avoid detection by the Apta surveillance, the ships do need to continue flying at low altitude, so it doesn’t mean there exists absolutely no danger.”

“Is there a land route? One that soldiers can move through?”

“I’ve never actually seen it so I can’t say for sure, but—” Zaat began before breaking off into his thoughts for a brief moment. “Very well, I shall have one of my slaves accompany you.”

“A slave will?”

“She’s previously flown a merchant ship to the west and as such, is familiar with its terrain.”

“You let a slave handle a ship?” Shique asked, revealing his utmost surprise.

Whether this was a habit of Zaj’s when he laughed, he nodded repetitively and answered him.

“She has good eyes and a good sense, you see. It’s something I’ve driven into her from the beginning. —You, go call Krau over,” Zaj relayed to a warehouse slave.

Until the time this slave called Krau arrived, Zaj spoke about the recent unrest developing in the areas neighbouring Apta.

“Goods loaded on ships and wagons have been assaulted by a group of bandits. Beginning with Ax, the west is a sovereignless world overflowing with small powers. As a result of its political instability, there is a

possibility of it carrying over here. Garbera has been guarding the trading route from Apta to its own lands, but of course the route secured into Mephius has remained unguarded. If the prince is to be keeper of Apta, I'd like you to first subdue the surrounding areas."

"My lord, I have summoned her."

"Ahh Krau, come here."

Casting a side glance at Krau appearing at the entranceway, Orba found himself at a loss for words. She was completely different from how he'd imagine her. Taking his reaction in good humour, Zaj enquired,

"As for whether being fat in itself is a virtue, I'm sure the views of the Mephian nobles differ."

"It can't be that you called me here just to badmouth me in front of the customer, now could it? *We're* busy people. Please hurry up and finish stating your business!"

Krau was a woman near her forties. Her body was rounded and her voice shrill, alongside her quick mouth. And to add to that, her attitude was flat-out rude of a different variety from all the slaves Orba had seen.

"Settle down now, Krau. I'd like to leave some work in your hands."

"If it's cleaning duty for the airships, I'll have to say no," Krau unconcernedly pulled her chin with a start for a short time. "Your vase smashing doesn't fall on me anyway. It was that battered cat your grandson picked up on the streets. Since that stupid ill-bred cat's come, the kitchen's been laid to waste, and sharpening its claws, its even targeted my secret stash..."

"Now now...I'm only asking you to listen to what I have to say. It's also my first, hearing about the vase."

Zaj quite briefly explained the situation to Krau.

“This person? Is Mephius’ prince?”

You’d think to be given the chance to serve the crown prince in one’s lifetime would be astounding, but Krau stopped short at opening her eyes.

“You’ll do it, won’t you.”

“I am but a slave. As my lord commands.”

Her tone was polite, but the way her eyes directed towards the prince was evidently assessing his worth, as if stating *Now then, will my new master be a person who will fill my stomach lots or not?*

Master and slave both, I can’t stand either of them.

A rather bitter aftertaste lingered. He had marched into the Haman Firm hoping to get the upper hand, but the sudden development likewise left Orba little room to breathe.

At any rate, I got what I came for.

“I have another request to make.”

“Yes, what might that be?”

The face of Zaj who courteously lowered his head had already returned to that of a merchant.

“I’d like you to lend me ships. And a few able-bodied men as well.”

“Ships....well, how many would that be?”

Zaj raised his eyes with a knowing face. It was likely because he was aware Orba’s forces comprised a small battalion.

“About ten—merchant ships.”

“Merchant ships? I can arrange them as battleships if you’d like.”

“No, there’s no point if they’re not merchant ships. And also—make arrangements for when our flagship, Doom, comes to Birac. Then have them convene with us. As for the fine details after that, I’ll leave someone with the information, so you can just follow his instructions.”

“Very well...”

Having already finished the calculations in his head, Zaj didn’t try to ask for any more information.

The fifth day’s stay in Birac.

It was that time when the day was about to set. Orba’s troops—mainly the regular troops lent to him by Oubary Bilan and Odyne Lorgo—began to discuss which store they should check out and head to today.

“Well thanks to the prince doing nothing but lying around, we’ve gone to most of the famous stores.”

“Still, it’s good it hasn’t turned into a commotion. If it were our general Odyne Lorgo, things wouldn’t have turned out this way.”

“It’d be great if we stayed in Apta the whole time. I can’t imagine going to war with Taúlia now at this point in time.”

Currently, they had become soldiers led under the command of Gil Mephius, the main focus of their conversation, and the very title which frequently resulted in them being fawned by prostitutes. They raised their cups, their faces beet red, shouting ‘A toast to the prince!’ As for whether they would be saying the same thing were they to be standing in

the face of death, that was a separate matter. In this way, they went out in their frolicking making it known their thereof lack of supervision. Vileena Owell, staring at them in the far-off distance, could do nothing short of feeling irritated.

“The number of troops granted to him are already few. If Taúlia were to advance its forces in large numbers, the whole bunch of them would go scurrying back home.”

“Please stop it with *the whole bunch of them*, princess.”

It wasn’t as if Theresia didn’t understand her mistress’ irritation, but they could do nothing but voice their complaints to those above them. It wasn’t only her conduct in speech that Theresia wanted her to stop, but also the drawing and cocking of her gun, which she had been doing for some time now.

She raised the gun lowered at her hips and took aim. She’d hung her own hand-made circular range target on the door, and the instant she turned around, she aligned the point of her gun to the centre of the target as if she couldn’t have it any other way.

Besides the piloting of airships, this refined technique had been taught to her by her grandfather as a means of self-protection. Once more, Vileena turned her back to the door. She closed her eyes to help sharpen her mind, steadied her breath, then breathed out.

“Yah!”

She cried, turning around and pointing the gun, zeroing in her line of sight. But it was at that moment that the door creaked open.

“Princess, here are the arranged deliveries—kyaahhh!”

“Waahhh!”

Her eyes met with the female attendant who entered and they both screamed out. A brief confusion and disarray, and after they both exchanged apologies, the attendant made a mad dash out of there, prompting a giggle from Theresia. Vileena glared back in return.

“You knew.”

“Why, what might you be talking about? Oh look, this dress is wonderful. The stand-up collar conforms to Garbera’s culture. Just what I’d expect from the trading town of Birac. It has a much better collection than Solon.”

Theresia feigned ignorance and looked at the pile of clothes brought over by the attendant. The wife of Fedom Aulin, the lord of Birac, had somewhat taken a liking to the princess and promised to have her attendant bring over some clothes today as well. Theresia had arranged the time and told all of the soldiers acting as guards that an attendant carrying a stack of clothes would be coming and to let her through.

“Could you be thinking of getting back at me?”

Vileena had turned the revolver of the gun with her finger. Though it could be considered practice, to preserve a feeling of tension, a single bullet had been loaded in.

“Since some time ago, Theresia, you’ve been acting out in spite.”

“Well, why shouldn’t I be? You directly spoke with the emperor without any prior warning. When I heard about it afterwards, I thought I was going to faint.”

“If the alliance were to disappear, it would also lose meaning in my being here. There’s no point in being afraid of back-talk arising calling me things like a forward princess.”

Vileena discontentedly turned the revolver in her hand repeatedly.

Though she had agreed to travel to Apta with Gil, she of course harboured doubts that the emperor had done this to remove the prince from the centre of politics. Furthermore, the rumour that the emperor had been frequently meeting with a messenger from Ende since she'd come here had also been brought to surface.

Isn't Emperor Guhl merely trying to cleverly set himself up in the relations between Garbera and Ende?

Vileena's standing was at best one half progressed into marriage, and by this deed, that position would grow increasingly insecure.

The princess had originally braced herself for marriage were that to be for the good of her homeland Garbera. If that were to yield no results whatsoever, she was ready to jet out of the country by airship.

"But the most pressing concern is Taúlia. If this escalates into a war with Mephius, any possibility of sending reinforcements to Garbera disappears. —Though I can't help feeling that was the emperor's aim from the start. All the more reason why he didn't dare award the prince an army that surpassed Taúlia's. I question whether our prince leisuring around here understands that."

"I'm sure he's thought of something. It's been that way up until now as well."

"Is that so." Dropping her back onto the chair with a thump, Vileena swung her legs back and forth.

"I've also thought that, so I've been holding it in and haven't said anything about our overstay here in Birac. I've even considered this might be some plan to strengthen his hold on the soldiers. But isn't this a pickle?"

“Now, now, princess. If that immodest appearance of yours were to be seen by the prince, you can’t hope to even begin to awaken a hundred year’s of love.”

I’ll burn myself if I make light of the prince.

The great hero Ryucown and Mephius’ aristocrat Zaat Quark. Vileena had seen with her own eyes how these two who opposed him met the same fate. She could feel he was no ordinary person and yet in the face of this, she also found it hard to accept that fact.

“In short, it’s that he’s, yes, immature would be the way to put it. Orba also said it. He’s secretive, and in spite of his meticulous preparations, he thoroughly performs them without informing his surroundings. Then at the critical moment he makes a display that surprises everyone as if to boast, ‘Hey, did you see that?’ Children really are such troublesome creatures.”

“Truly.”

Not noticing the hinted meaning behind Theresia’s remark, Vileena continued,

“I can also try to incite the prince and have him send reinforcements to Garbera. Now then, how should I proceed to manipulate the prince according to my wishes…”

“At the very least, it won’t be by practising mastering your gun handling.”

At that point in time, there was a knock on the door. The one who named himself on the other side was none other than Gil Mephius.

As expected, this was enough to make even Vileena’s face go red, and she immediately stood up from her seat and hid the gun under the couch in a flurry.

Gil entered the room and made a bow.

“We’re leaving tomorrow. Get ready.”

“Tomorrow? Are you all finished? With you business here in Birac, that is.”

“All finished.”

“I suppose it would be wrong of me to ask of the fine details. After all, you must see me as an improper lady.”

“No,” Gil said, his face going sour. “It goes as far as borrowing some ships from a Birac merchant. It took a little more time than I had hoped though.”

“Ships? Aren’t there a shortage of soldiers to operate them?”

“Well, I won’t say that’s not wrong—it’s not a worrying amount exceeding the numbers we have.”

“Prince.”

Her face turning serious, Vileena looked upwards at Gil. Caught off guard by their unexpectedly close distance, the prince’s face strangely tensed.

“W-What is it?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Vileena lowered her pallid face. Her shoulders dropped down powerlessly.

Gil, after seeing her hesitant action, spoke up.

“...You’re worried about Garbera, aren’t you, princess?”

Though she had been speaking about how to get the prince to send reinforcements to them just now, having that directly said to her made Vileena startle. The single worry she didn’t want him to know felt as if it had been pricked open.

“It’s nothing that has to do with the prince.”

“It’s not something that has absolutely nothing to do with me.”

Orba started to get angry. Vileena shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s the same for you, prince. You never do me the honour of divulging your stratagems to me. It’s the same for me. I have my own strategies.”

“Strategy?”

“Say for example…”

As Vileena began to speak, Theresia was horrified to see her pull out the hidden revolver. She thrust the gun at the prince, his eyes likewise open in surprise.

“If I were to, at some point, use this to take you hostage and demand some soldiers.”

“Take me hostage? What would you do with those soldiers?”

“I’m sure you already know. I’ll personally lead them and go running over to Garbera.”

Because she had said it with her chest held high, even Vileena at this point realised it was a crude plan.

“...Although I’ll have you know I’ve thought of a more elaborate plan. This is only an if.”

There was a short pause. Then Gil burst out into laughter. Vileena knit up her brows.

“Is there something funny?”

Everything about it was, princess, Theresia whispered to Vileena in a hushed voice, but then Gil waved his hand.

“Ah, I get it. Then I’ll exercise my plans in a way so that you won’t have to enact your sure-kill plan.”

“Sure-kill...you’re making fun of me. I’ve thought of others. Really, I have,” Vileena obstinately insisted.

But why was it that she felt Gil was making fun of her from his behaviour, and at some point Theresia had also joined in on the laughter. Finally managing to suppress his laughter,

“Well then princess, be sure to hurry with the packing.”

“I’ve already finished that a long time ago!” Vileena voiced out in objection to the end.

As Theresia watched the princess who saw off the departing prince’s back, she quietly murmured.

My, what a strange relationship the two of them have. They’re like a little brother and sister playing at war. That is amusing in itself, but it seems that it will take much much more time before their relationship develops into a romantic one.

Part 3

The following day, Gil gave out official notice for their departure early morning.

With the exception of the Imperial Guards and Pashir and the war slaves, the soldiers were naturally forced into a large scramble.

As they held their heads from the pain of two day's worth of drinking, they hurriedly put on their armour and saddled onto their horses.

"Shit! That damned *fool*!"

The soldiers grumbled, a significant few not having had the time to tie together the string of their armours as a result of being rushed.

"He could have at least told us beforehand."

"I'll bet it was the gallant Garberan princess who'd given him a good kick in the arse."

Everyone just barely arrived finishing lining in formation, and they then departed through the Birac gates. Their departure this time had been by the prince's own discretion, so there was no crowd to see them off.

Serving as vanguard were the dragoons riding atop the small-sized Tengo. The carriage the princess rode in was protected by the best warriors handpicked from the imperial guards in the centre, and the horse cavalry in the front and rear, the clicking of their hooves echoing into the distance, with the foot soldiers fortifying the defences in all four directions further out.

Pulling the cages with several Baians within were the large-sized Houban. A flat body with eight long legs. In terms of appearances, it might as well have been a giant spider covered in scales.

Roughly one hour after departing from Birac.

"This is strange," a single man muttered in the back of the march. Chains were fastened around both his arms, connecting to a cage harbouring several dragons in front of him. The man walking beside him, possibly

owing to fatigue, used only his eyes to ask the meaning behind the words.

“The number of soldiers are decreasing. Why did he assign some of the already few troops to Birac?”

“Looks like you’re paying quite the attention,” another man behind him joined in. “As for me, I don’t have that leisure. My bet is that they ran away. If it weren’t for these annoying chains, I’d do that too.”

“If it’s about that, they were left to reinforce the personnel at Birac—”

“Pashir!”

At that point in time, a white horse turned around and came over from the front.

“Looks like you still have the leisure to chitchat. Should I try increasing the pace a bit?”

“Gil.”

Orba looked down from his horse on Pashir, who walked pulling the dragon cart. His eyes shone with light amidst the dirt and cloud of dust covering his face. The number of war slaves was a little over two-hundred. Already more than half of them appeared to be pulling the four dragon carts.

“About the whole rush. What for? At any rate, we can’t even hope to defend the fortress with these numbers. What are you scheming with the evil face of yours this time?”

“It’s nothing for a slave to worry over,” Orba sneered. “More importantly, what’s with that attitude? I went through all that trouble to save your skin. Be sure not to get on my bad side so that it doesn’t go to waste.”

“Then, if I may request a favour, crown prince,” Pashir spoke satirically. He was the only one making a face that seemed to indicate he could continue walking for months or even an entire year.

“What is it? Enlighten me.”

“Once we get to the fortress, maybe you could let me have a match with that gladiator, Orba. And a long sword, for a one-on-one. No, actually, I don’t mind if I have to do it bare-handed. I’m sure it’ll be an exciting sideshow as you drink yourselves off.”

“I was wondering what you were going to ask. You two already fought plenty in Solon, haven’t you?”

—This guy...

Orba remained cold, suppressing the ferocious smile that seemed to unconsciously form.

“Both our lives are still intact. The match hasn’t been decided!”

“If he also feels the same way, then I’ll eventually give you a chance.”

Orba flashed a smile and once more, trotted his horse back to the front.

Domick Flats—the entire plane was a colourless flatland. However, each time the horses’ feet tread the earth, Orba felt his spirits lift. After all, Orba’s hometown was within a short distance of Apta, and while it also contained gruesome memories for him, approaching near it now after over six years had resurrected those strong feelings once more.

Finally, after taking two breaks and around the time the sun cast a shadow over the lands, a change began to be seen in the expanse of rocky mountain scenery and sandy terrain. Greenery appeared bit by bit as they climbed up the hill. Situated some several kilometres further out

was a village where a messenger had been deployed beforehand. They lodged in the village of no more than two-hundred houses as billets for the night.

The next day, the troops entered the woods. The branches of the trees densely weaved together like a roof, the lighting dim. It was as if they were advancing through the inside of a cave.

Apta was an invaluable region to Mephius for its abundance of forests and resources. Having it stolen by Garbera must have dealt Mephius a serious blow. And in spite of it finally being returned to Mephius, the emperor had sent over only a small number of troops. Orba couldn't understand his intentions.

Does he no longer see anything outside his own surroundings? Orba had even thought.

As he rode his horse forward, however, he quickly began thinking about other matters. He set aside whatever the emperor's aim and schemes might be. Now Orba needed to focus only on the things at hand, to cope with his situation. He organized the information on the west's history that he had heard from Zaj Haman in his head.

To the west of Mephius, commonly referred to as the Tauran Provinces, was a group of city-states.

The Zerdians dwelling there roamed the high grounds near the Mephian borders to this day, in the same way the nomads of the Ryuujin Faith and its founding ancestors had.

It was a tale from two hundred years ago, and even before then. The denizens of the grasslands that surrounded the desert, perhaps owing to their inherent nomadic dispositions, chose not to place trust in those of the same race and instead constantly engaged in strife.

And the one who set his eyes there was the man called Jasch Bazgan. Being the commander of the Mephian cavalry, he commanded his forces and forcibly tore the Zerdians apart from their territory. Of course, the Zerdians' counteroffensive was also fierce, and it was then that he received reinforcements from the Mephian homeland and held out against them. From this occasion, he was said to have received one of two of the sovereign's seals handed down since the olden era of magic kingdoms, the 'Dragon's Claw', from the nomad elders.

Jasch, using this chance, christened the lands of 'Zer Tauran' under the name of the Dragon God and began to announce himself 'king'. Furthermore, he gave the various fortresses located in a region of grasslands to his subordinates, and rebuilt the ancient ruins centred between into a grand temple. Using the Ryuujin Faith, he planned to unify the tribal collective.

When that time came to pass, Jasch delivered a letter to the Mephius emperor declaring them as equals. Enraged by this, the Mephius mainland deployed troops to subjugate Jasch. However they were too late. Not only were they driven back, but Mephius also lost several of its western territories.

However, Jasch Bazgan's momentum ended with that. A mere four years after he ascended the throne, the night right after the New Years celebration came to a close, he suddenly passed away. There were those who said he suffered the wrath of the Dragon God for branding his own self-righteousness, while others believed that the elders, fearful of Jasch's momentum, cast a curse on him.

The Bazgan household rushed to set up a successor, but by that time, civil strife had already begun appearing throughout the entirety of the Zer Tauran lands.

Having lost its cohesive force, the Bazgan family secretly fled from the capital, Zer Illias, they had once ruled in splendour. Amongst the two claws that could be said to symbolise Zer Tauran, one was in the Bazgans' hands, but the other of the pair had been dedicated to the temple and they hadn't had time to retrieve it.

Soon after, the Bazgan family, with the bare minimal number of troops, arrived east to what is presently the fortress city of Taúlia.

At this point, Mephius tried to regain its territory, but it was by the Bazgan's luck that Mephius once again engaged in war with a clan from the southeast (now presently Garberan retainers).

At this time, in the capital of Zer Tauran, at the temple in the town of Zer Illias, a priest of the Ryuujin doctrines, chief magician Garda, tried to protect the temple from the hands of a hundred converts in addition to mercenaries and pillagers. He, at that time, performed a number of atrocious incantations that made such a tremendous display of power so fearsome it continues to haunt the Zerdians' dreams to this day.

But even a magician could not completely eliminate a group made up of hundreds and thousands of cavalrymen, and Zer Illias was eventually engulfed in a sea of flames. However, while steel swords sliced off the heads of the priests and rams destroyed the fortress gates, Garda left a final declaration.

"I will ensure the dragon's claw alone is handed to no one, should this body perish or turn to ashes and vanish into grassland soils."

And with that, he vanished. The invaders killed most of the believers, and although they plundered a good number of treasures and sculptures from the temple, the pivotal 'claw' was never found.

Zer Tauran in this way changed rulers and continued as a country for the meantime. However, there being civil strife on end, it ultimately

collapsed without lasting a third year. The small states governed the scattered towns one by one, raising their armies, tirelessly and repeatedly exchanging or breaking alliances over their disputes. In that time, they received attacks from the northern coastal regions and Mephius once more, but the Zerdians were strangely cooperative against the foreign invaders. They stood side by side with the enemies they should have been brandishing their blades against in hatred for their slain relatives just yesterday, and attacked the invaders who had come from the north and west together, taking on the name of a 'Crusade to protect the Sovereign's Seal'.

A long time streamed by coloured in blood and war, and now at present.

The current feudal lord of Taúlia, Ax Bazgan, was forty-one years old. Naturally, as dictated by his name, he belonged to a former house of Mephius, the Bazgan House, once ruling supreme in the west.

Having also crossed swords with the current Mephius emperor, Guhl Mephius, his hostilities with Mephius had not died out even now.

He did mention that Ax got closer to Garbera during Mephius' ten year war with them.

With his body rocking up and down atop his horse, Orba recalled the minute details of what Zaj had said. They had even proposed to join hands with Garbera to attack Mephius, though that notice was directed to Vileena's grandfather, Jeorg Owell. Of course, Jeorg had already stepped down from the throne at that time.

And yet purposely choosing Jeorg showed that, even now, he held tremendous influence over Garbera, and that they presumed if they could gain him alone as ally, the king, who did not amount to his father according to rumours, would have to concede.

"The very thought makes me sick."

Jeorg, having seen through this, flew into a rage. Of course, negotiations broke down.

Just what I'd expect from the man having influenced Princess Vileena the most. That itself is a merit.

Ax, even now, seemed to occasionally slander him on remembrance as 'that damned gramps'. Orba's mouth swerved into a smile for a second.

He felt the winds beginning to blow.

However, the leaves and branches showed no visible change. He tilted his head, wondering if he had imagined it. And then, a mere four, five metres away from Orba to his flank, a cavalry soldier, and of course, the horse he was riding on, tumbled over. The horses following along behind it reared to a stop, with several soldiers being thrown off their horses.

Tatan, Tan, sounds of gunshot flew in front of and behind him. Ignoring the ricocheting sand and dust bouncing up from the ground, Orba pulled on his reins full force.

"Go, go, go!"

A slightly elevated peak rose up on his flank. The crowded trees standing there concealed the snipers, Orba saw. Anticipating the dragoons being sent to the front, they aimed at the main body where Gil was.

Orba, beside the soldiers who sprung to life and frantically spurred on their horses, cast a fleeting glance behind, and the Imperial Guards, beginning with Shique, rushed over on their horses while guarding the carriage. The gunshots continued without pause.

Orba turned to ride opposite the fleeing troops. He caught sight of his gunmen riding, half-stooped. He handed down a short command. Then, the carriage passed him.

“Prince!”

Vileena stuck her head out of the carriage and, for a split second, their eyes met.

“We’ll meet again at Apta.”

Immediately after saying this, he met up with Gowen and the Imperial Guard cavalry.

“Gowen, forward!”

“Got it.”

Leading the soldiers behind him who reared their horses into neighs, Orba spurred his horse into a speedy gallop and advanced through a gentle slope at the base of the hill. He pressed his body down against the horse, no guarantee that the continuous gunfire raining down upon him wouldn’t hit him, only advancing with conviction; advancing, and advancing.

Carrying the wounds from the Solon arena on his body, pain shot through him starting with his fractured right collarbone, but he nevertheless paid it no heed.

On the other end of the trees, the clustered figures of his enemies came into sight. A single enemy stood up from his knees and readied his gun—Orba’s eyes stared directly into the muzzle.

“Fire!”

Orba waved his hand as he cried out, and his artillery unit under the cliff fired. With the time he drew the enemy's attention using himself as decoy, he had the artillery unit camouflage themselves under the trees and assume position. The majority of the fire had only bored holes into the bushes or blown away branches, but blood spurted out of several of the enemies and they collapsed.

"Cut them down!"

Orba straightened his back on top of the horse, and taking hold of the sword with the his left hand, swung it forward. Letting out a battle cry, his soldiers charged up the hill.

However, the enemy was also quick to react.

"Retreat!"

By the time they reached the summit, their backs were already distant. Their group of forty, fifty men smoothly steered their horses down the steep descent where trees packed densely with one another like a maze. They wore no armour. Many of them wore clothes torn to rags. Gowen reined his horse over.

"Looks like the usual bandits. Still, to pick a fight with a country's army...well, they've got quite the nerve. What are you going to do? Chase after them?"

However Orba shook his head. The enemy was familiar with the terrain and most importantly their numbers were unknown. It was better to meet up with the main body of his forces. But something else bothered him—

"What's wrong?" Casting a sharp glance rather fitting for a man in his years, Gowen stared at Orba's face. "You're making the same kind of face as someone who came across their own grave in some unknown place."

“That’s an interesting way of putting it. It sounds like something Shique would say.”

“Would you rather I phrase it more smartly then? You’re not looking too well.”

“It’s ’cause everything happened so suddenly—We’re setting off!”

Ignoring Gowen’s face that seemed to say, ‘So you’re gonna be like that, are you?’, Orba returned to the road accompanied by his soldiers from whence they came.

That voice...

The piercing cry of the man appearing to be the enemy commander who shouted, “Retreat!” even now rang in his head. It resembled the accent of his home village.

The sudden gunfire had startled the soldiers and their horses, but above all, most disturbed were the dragons.

The Houban towing the imperial carriage let out a cry echoing throughout the forest, and the ones inside the carriage carried along by the dragon thought they would be flattened, far more fearful of this crisis than the attack from the bandits.

The Baians within the cages also stirred, and the carriage seemed about to topple over at any moment, when a single shadow fearlessly approached.

It was Hou Ran. The young girl, riding on horseback, drew near the Houban’s feet which would wholly crush several grown men and, bending forward from the horse, lightly touched its foot. What happened after couldn’t really be seen, for a cloud of dust had flown up, but when the view cleared the next moment, Hou Ran was riding the flattened back of

the Houban, and from there she was extending her hand to inside the cage.

“It’s as if I’m watching a circus trainer. How marvellous. If a dragon were to get as attached to a person as that, perhaps we might even be able to keep and raise a small-sized one in the manor.”

Theresia spoke to Vileena excitedly now, when the men, horses and dragons had finally calmed down.

“Calm yourself down, Theresia. More importantly, is the prince—”

“Ah, I can see him now. He’s heading in our direction.”

Vileena pushed aside Theresia’s head and poked her own head out the window this time.

Now that she looked, certainly a group with the prince in the lead was joining up with them. Vileena *heaved* a sigh of relief. There was never a moment of boredom with the prince around.

“Prince.”

Vileena called out, sticking the upper half of her body outside.

Prince Gil slowed down his horse. It looked like he was calling out to the slaves behind the carriage. As a result of them being pulled along by the Houban, they were a moment away from being crushed by the cages. After that, he trotted to the front of the carriage.

He was saying something to someone with a smile. Hou Ran, riding the back of the Houban, waved her hand in response.

The dotted rays of sunlight gently illuminated Hou Ran’s thin smile. It was an awfully mature, inexplicable smiling face that nevertheless seemed to

match the young girl's age. After exchanging some more words, Prince Gil laughed again.

"Is there something the matter?"

"T-There isn't."

Vileena quickly pulled her head back into the carriage. Emotions that she herself could not sort stirred within her chest. Some time after,

"So you got out safely."

Prince Gil approached the carriage on his horse.

"Thanks to your efforts," was all Vileena offered as a reply.

The prince seemed to have taken this as the appropriate response for the gallant princess, and he returned to the front of the party.

Afterwards, they covered two hours' distance without rest.

Together with the opening of the forest, Apta Fortress came into view.

Chapter 3: Territory Marking

Part 1

By the time their whole party arrived at the front gates of Apta Fortress, the sun was about to set.

The fortress walls towered over them with its overwhelming height.

On the tip of the protruding spires spread across the walls were raised Mephian and Garberan flags. They likely spotted Orba approaching through the crenel, for Orba saw the Garberan flags ahead of him taken down. That was proof of the transfer.

“That was quite the adventure.”

Shique joked, smiling at Orba who rode beside him, but Orba did not say anything back.

This is Apta.

The weather-beaten ramparts, the shadows of the spires that stood out like the head of a black demon under the dusk, and the distant voices of what felt like those of wild beasts and birds blending into the soldier’s chatter—

This was the fortress his brother Roan had been in. And this was also the place he had thought to one day go himself, bearing a single sword on him.

The gates opened with a creak, the sound dispelling the emotions Orba were harbouring. The bridge lowered and the Garberan knights assembled on the path connecting the fortress past the deeply dug trench. Standing in front and offering a respectful bow to Orba was a long-haired man clad in a robe—Garbera’s Noue Salzantes.

Orba got off his horse and exchanged greetings with Noue.

“I’ve been awaiting you, your highness. Did you happen to take a detour?”

“We were attacked by beasts dwelling in the woods. Recently, these beasts have made leaps, and can even handle guns.”

“You mean…”

Noue’s eyes widened. As for whether this was all an act or not, Orba had considered trying to read his face, but his opponent was far more proficient in the use of this variant of subterfuge and he immediately gave up the thought.

If he were trying to kill us, he would’ve planned other ways.

In addition, were Gil Mephius to die now, it was Noue who would be most troubled. Along the way, he had reviewed all the information at his disposal and came to a conclusion. Why Noue had tried to cause turmoil in Mephius—and why he would go as far as to sacrifice Vileena’s life to do it—

The answer he arrived at hinted the movements Noue would take from here on.

Whether it’ll go the way I think is another story.

With the uproar over the rebellion in Solon, he fully realised his own shortage in experience and knowledge. Precisely the reason why he now tread cautiously. He sought information in great volumes. All that remained was to rely on his animalistic senses. Relying on his senses certainly did not seem very dependable, but...

Even then, these are the senses that helped me narrowly escape death. They’re nothing to make light of.

In the end, the final thing Orba turned to was the feeling of the sword he lived by.

The citizens of Apta received Prince Gil's troops proceeding down its streets with waves of acclaim. Those who moved here from Garbera had already returned to their own country. The population's entirety were residents of Mephius since over six years past. The changing of the sovereign or country that governed them made little difference to their lives. Truly, Orba, whose hometown was near Apta, was also not particularly conscious of the 'Mephius name'.

Crossing through the centre of town, they ascended the hill and entered the castle keep. People were running about inside the passage, the fortress soldiers and craftsmen clamouring.

A feast had already been prepared within the banquet halls; beer and food were bountiful.

As he gave a side glance to the soldiers feasting in this welcoming party, Orba exchanged a toast with Noue.

"I'd have never imagined the princess would come here."

"It's father's worldly discretion. This will one day be my castle. It was better to get accustomed to here, was his reasoning."

"Here will?" Noue questioned, seeming somewhat careful with his choice of words. "That should not last for long. After all, your highness is the first successor to the imperial throne."

"It isn't too bad relaxing here in these rurals either. And also, I'd be getting used to the status of a castle lord, am i right?"

"That, certainly holds true."

During their conversation, Noue never got into discussing the nature of Garbera and Ende's relations. Orba had also been amassing information from various sources. The other day, a messenger from Garbera had visited Solon, but the emperor on account of being busy refused even a meeting.

The moment he heard this, the image of the dispirited young girl he saw in Birac had flashed in his mind. It accompanied feelings of anger. However, like Noue, Orba dared not speak of this.

"Lord Noue, when will you be departing from here?"

"Once the transference has come to pass, we all have our various tasks. The moment that settles—yes, I'd say five days from now."

Of course, whether it was Zaj or Noue, he could not probe their intentions simply by talking to them face to face. They were men a cut above the rest.

Five days later, huh.

At that time, things would be set into motion—that was what Orba read.

The following morning, Orba wandered the fortress interior.

A fortress city. These fortress quarters served as both a place of command and living quarters for Orba and his soldiers, and situated atop the hillside across the entire northeastern tip. These bulky fortress walls stretched around to enclose an urban area housing a population of five thousand.

The western ramparts, the only location where the walls were low, stood over a 50 metre cliff. The Yunos River flowed directly under it, also demarcating the border.

The cliff, which was just as well a wall of nature, towered almost vertically over the river. But in a spot spread across some few hundreds of metres in the north, the slope gentled. On that cliff was a road, as if carved by a knife, that meandered upwards until finally reaching the northern gates.

“That is the transport route for goods through the Yunos River,” a soldier appointed as guide explained.

With the exception of the west side, all gates were guarded by watchtowers and spires. And there were also terraced hillslopes and mounted artillery around the northern and southern gates. The northern encampment also came into contact with the cliff, on the off-chance the enemy invaded by air from the west. Furthermore, runways were prepared above the fortress walls running between the eastern and western urban districts, so air defensive measures were also taken care of.

An impregnable fortress.

If I’m to trust Zaj Haman’s information...

Ax Bazgan did not own a very large air force. Which meant he had no choice but to go the roundabout way, directly attacking from the north or south.

Or, the possibility the enemy might come ferrying across the Yunos River wasn’t nil, but the Yunos River’s current was fast, and with there being nowhere to use to take shelter, the risk of being showered in a rain of bullets and arrows until they finished crossing proved high.

That is, assuming sufficient numbers of soldiers are deployed there.

To begin with, this wasn’t a location he could satisfactorily spread out 200-300 soldiers to form a line of defense. The number of soldiers just

weren't enough to deploy to constantly man all the cannons, watchtowers, or gates.

I guess it'll be fine as long as we see them. By the time the enemy comes close, we'll be ready.

Of course, in the fortress was not only the soldiers, but also a great many attendants, slaves, and artisans, of particular note being the armoursmiths, chefs, and blacksmiths. The majority of them were people who worked in the fort since before the land had been taken by Garbera. Their allegiance to a country was shallow, as they appeared to have continued working as usual, only this time, for Garbera.

"Meaning, they continued happily eating Mephius-made bread here too."

"That stuff doesn't even taste good."

Orba joked around while walking accompanied by the 'Orba pretender' Kain.

He had noticed Kain getting used to the fanged tiger mask as of late.

Then again, his personality was childish as ever.

Throughout the day, they climbed the respective towers sticking their heads over the crenel, inspected the locations of the stables their warhorses were kept in and the locations of the smiths where they forged swords and armours, going as far as to visit the powder mills.

As he did, an imperial guard and also former slave rushed over and kneeled before him. "Woops," Kain said, re-adjusting his manner of behaviour. Naturally, even though they were the imperial guards, Kain needed to hide the fact that he was occasionally disguised as Orba as the majority were not aware the prince and Orba were one and the same.

"How was it?"

“Sir, it is as you predicted. A week ago, a group of reinforcements seem to have arrived from Garbera.”

He had chosen the appropriate men from within the Imperial Guards skilled in gathering respective intel, disguised them, and sent them all around. Orba had done this time and time again. Even should he already be in the friendly territory of Apta, Orba performed this vigilantly.

“Hmm...reinforcements?” After the soldier left, Kain asked questioningly. “Why now, when the transfer to Mephius has already been decided? It can’t be that they’re trying to take over the fortress and take the prince hostage…”

“The wine you drank yesterday might’ve also been laced.”

“Whueehhh.”

Orba laughed at Kain who seriously seemed like he was about to be sick.

The courtyard immediately within the castle gates had a beautifully trimmed lawn with a brilliant display of flowers and shrubs. There, Orba caught sight of Shique seated near a fountain. He was enjoying a pleasant chat with several young ladies, presumably servants working at the fortress. Kain cursed out silently at the all too cheerful atmosphere.

“What’s his problem. In spite of himself going around saying he hates women.”

‘That’s why it must be like hell for him,” Orba chuckled.

Taking notice of them, Shique directed an intense glare at Orba in a way unperceived by the girls.

“The ones suited for collecting information, are women, Orba,” was what the drunk Shique proudly declared to him yesterday.

“Sure, while men might be weak to a woman’s wiles, to compensate, they can get a feel of their intentions . *But*, *women*, while they might be able to levelly assess this when done to other women, are driven by the thought that this feverish love can’t possibly turn out a lie whenever it concerns themselves. Of course, this isn’t a simple display of selfless love. You need to coldly thrust them away on occasion, as to leave them with the feeling, *I don’t want him to hate me; I don’t want to lose his love; so I’ll pour my everything out for him.*”

“Is that how it works?”

“Then again, it’s impossible for you, Orba. Your hands are tied with your fiancee princess alone. If I had to pick your weakness, that would surely be it.”

“Then,” Orba said as he stifled a laugh, “I’ll have to leave *that* up to you, Shique.”

The drunkenness on Shique’s face, having stirred up the hornet’s nest, had been completely blown off.

“Sometimes I ask myself,” Shique remarked, spouting complaints in the end, “why I’m this kindhearted. It’s as if I’m the one selflessly offering my love to you. Can’t I hope for a bit more consideration?” *Now then.*

After surveying the area, Orba thought of Noue, who was most probably, likewise, currently ascertaining the Mephian battle formations.

He should’ve grasped the inadequacy of Mephius’ forces. It should be clear as day that Guhl’s intention is to purposely prolong the war and not meddle between Ende and Garbera’s affairs. Which would mean...

The day where they could hold a frank discussion without bothering with the whole reading faces or negotiating wasn’t too far off.

Afterwards, Orba showed up at the once-more prepared banquet alongside the setting sun. Three days and three nights of feasts were scheduled to continue from today on. Having become lord of a castle, Orba intimately greeted the crowd and patted their shoulders in what was a festive manner.

Vileena, unable to settle herself down in this seating, left her seat, and Noue also made his leave only showing his face briefly, but taking care to give his congratulations. Without paying any particular mind to this, Orba merrily conducted himself while taking a careful look around. Most of the imperial guards had not turned up as he had previously established.

“Ooh, your imperial highness! If you would, a toast.”

War had called out to him from the hall’s corner. He was a former sword slave Orba had sent into Oubary’s camp of mercenaries; a middle aged man who carried a dull air about him at first glance. As Orba approached them, the soldiers working for Oubary likewise humbly stood up from their seats.

“At ease, at ease.”

With a broad smile, he drank a cup of wine on the table. Orba certainly was not resilient to alcohol, but there was no helping it as this formality was also part of the act. War also started laughing.

“Your highness, this here is a man of valour who has done long service under General Oubary, Sir Bane.”

So he’s the one.

Orba glanced at the red faced man War introduced. He nearly broke into a grin for a moment, but narrowly restrained it. He already knew this man had once been in Apta from the information he’d gotten from War. Namely, that he was one of the culprits who’d abandoned his brother

Roan so that he could flee first, and then burned down the village Orba belonged to. He was a plump, greasy man with eyes slanted down. Truly, he possessed an indistinct air evenly matched with War's, and Orba felt he could somehow understand how the man contented himself at the position of captain.

"My, what a commendable deed it was, your highness." Bane, unsurprisingly, was unable to conceal his tension, but spoke to him smiling regardless. "Your judgment the time we received an attack our way here could truly be described as deft and awe-inspiring."

"Is that so. Here, a toast."

Feigning jollyness, he offered him a cup. Bane respectfully obliged. War waited for the appropriate timing and then spoke up.

"Captain Bane has told me he was previously present in Apta."

"Oh? You had fought here against the Garberan army?"

"I have."

"You should also be more acquainted with here than I. Won't you join me in inspecting Apta tomorrow?"

"Eh?"

Bane's face stilled as if he stopped breathing, and then his eyes glowed.

"I-If you are fine with someone like me, by all means have me accompany you to any place, any time."

"Aah. I'll be depending on you."

Even now, his nails ate into the skin of his clasped hands. Staying here for long would likely aggravate his emotions, so he performed the proper greetings and then left the hall.

Compared to the Solon imperial capital's surroundings, the night wind here was refreshing in its own way.

Now then,

As he viewed the distant forest sunken into darkness, Orba wiped the smile and stupor from his face, plucking off the fingers bitten into his clasped hand one at a time. His palm was covered in sweat. Much death and blood had been brought forth by those hands. Occasionally, he even consciously discarded the emotions that should have accompanied what he wrought. All so he could take back all that was stolen from him.

There's still a lot of groundwork that needs to be laid out. It'd be good if I made it in time.

Part 2

On the third day's banquet, Orba invited the war slaves to the hall. Their feet were still fastened in chains, though were also permitted a smidgen of a drink. Their expressions stiff, they behaved like some castaway dog thrown into the fray.

Since the time their rebellion had been thwarted, they were in constant fear, not knowing whether their heads would be severed this day or possibly the next. Even after the prince added them into his forces as war slaves, it was ultimately the whim of a man in power, and they never knew when their fates would take a turn for the worst.

They were alive for now. Gowen gave them training everyday, and they were beginning to think that it may actually not be some simple whim or capricious thought of the prince's meant to kill some time. Nonetheless, it was well known that war slaves were given the most dangerous tasks in battle. They were ultimately disposable soldiers. There were many instances where war slaves were forced to commence suicidal attacks

such that it was guaranteed not a single one would make it back alive even as their backs were threatened from friendly fire.

They proceeded through their meals and wine gloomily. Mira's figure was also present amidst the female slaves serving the table. She had worked at the grand stadium of Solon, and it was none other than her whom Orba had taken hostage when Pashir and the other slaves tried to cause a rebellion.

In that spot where dark clouds seemed to gather, Mira alone behaved cheerfully. The slaves could do little more than return smiling faces when she spoke to them, but they seemed to suddenly brighten up just from her presence.

And with Mira as the origin, a disturbance took place.

"Hey you, keeping company with those slaves won't be any fun. Come here to us."

A single member of Oubary's Black Armoured Division said, grabbing her shoulders. Mira tried to politely refuse, but another soldier had come along and while laughing vulgarly forced Mira onto their shoulders.

"Hold up, she's mine."

The first soldier called out laughingly, taking Mira back with his hands. It had only been an instant after when Mira, being tugged from both sides, raised a scream. The nearby Pashir stood up and, extending his hand sturdily as a log, lifted the soldier by the back of his neck. He flung him at the Black Armoured Division members who'd begun to gather. Several of them fell over and collapsed.

"Y-y…"

"You bloody slave. You askin' for a fight?!"

As if treating this as a sideshow to the wine, the Black Armoured Division suddenly descended on them, and the slaves snarled back, all standing up to confront them. Naturally, the slaves' feet were chained, but it turned into a grapple, a scuffle, and eventually an all-out brawl.

"T-This shitty bastard."

A member of the Black Armoured Division picked up a spear leaning against the wall. While they were allies, the opponent was a slave so he didn't hold back. At first, he thrust with the shaft of the spear, but Pashir landed on the table with near acrobatic display in his movements and made use of his chains to repel a second and third blow. Blood rushed to the soldier's head and he readied the tip of his spear.

The instant he began to thrust forward, the soldier swooned and fell forward. Gowen was behind him with a vase of wine in his right hand.

"That's enough!"

Forcing his way in was Gil. As expected, even the Black Armoured Division stopped moving.

"Do you intend on spoiling my ceremonious occasion? Everyone who participated in this fight gets the whip!"

Firing words of abuse as a drunk would, Gil kicked a nearby soldier's knee and punched a war slave in the head. From his left and right, Shique and Gowen came in to restrain him.

"Let go of me! These insolent cretins are—!"

"Your highness, your highness. Please calm yourself."

"Now now, let's get to your bedroom. The night is late."

The two imperial guards appeared to partly drag the prince, who wrought further curses, away from the hall.

And the following day, that incident turned to gossip within Apta spreading as far as the urban districts.

The faces of the people exchanging whispers of rumours were marked with shock and unease at their future.

“It seems the prince himself also participated in the quarrel.”

“Will things be all right? The soldiers are already few, and here they are engaging in internal squabbles.”

“If the Garberan army leaves Apta like this, what’ll happen to us?”

“It’ll be all right. No war’s happening. See there? Don’t make those faces in front of the children.”

Whether it was their ruler that would change or the country’s infrastructure that would change, the only thing that concerned the denizens was whether or not the change would function duly as a shield to protect them and guarantee peace of mind over their lives.

Unrest and dissatisfaction plagued not only the populace, but also the soldiers in question. However, Prince Gil’s proclamation in his drunken fit that ‘everyone gets the whip’ could not be enacted. They were not Gil’s personal soldiers. They were no more than soldiers lent to him by Oubary and Odyne, and even as a prince, handling them as he pleased would cause problems for him in the distant future.

It was because they grasped this that they instead acted haughty.

“Won’t you pass that message to his highness?”

Seizing the imperial guards were these superciliously spoken words.

“Those bloody slaves are mongrels who went against Mephius. I don’t plan to say anything against the prince’s tolerant treatment, but to have them dine in the same place as us regular soldiers is going a bit too far.”

“Beasts are useful because they are properly tamed. Wild as they are, they’ll only indiscriminately bare their fangs at enemies and allies alike.”

“—So they said.”

Orba recited the soldiers’ voices of dissatisfaction in front of Pashir and the war slaves.

They were at the fortress yard in a spot separated through a stone wall used for military training. All of the slaves had both knees on the ground with the soldiers’ gleaming guns surrounding them. Orba stared at their faces smeared with sweat and dirt from having finished Gowen’s training.

“You sure are awfully hated. As things are now, friendly fire’s sure to happen the day battle occurs.”

“What are you trying to say?” Pashir said, ready to take a bite at him even now. “Are you saying it’s about time to have our heads?”

“I did tell you to watch your tone, Pashir.”

Orba approached the slave and jerked up his chin with a finger. His glaring eyes in close proximity; the blazing emotions together with the suppressed murderous intent that seemed to blast out; supposing the only one here were Pashir alone, assuming he held not a single sword or even a single arrow in his hand, and even with his legs fastened in chains, there was no doubt he’d sink his fangs into Orba’s neck, or wring his neck in a vise.

However, there were a good number of slaves present. Taking Pashir’s personality into account, Orba knew he wasn’t one to lose himself in his own emotions if it would mean bringing down his companions with him.

“...Then, what is it you want us to do?”

“It’s only one thing. Do as I say. And to add, should you carry out even just one task, you get money. Women even. If you hate following me, I’ll even set you free.”

“You wouldn’t,” Pashir gasped in disbelief.

“There’s no way you don’t know about my Imperial Guards. They’re, the whole lot of them, all former sword slaves.”

The slaves exchanged glances. The reality of the imperial guards had an effect. Their faces were unsettled. They wavered.

They, at one point, tried to raise the banner of rebellion together with Pashir. Of course, the reasoning being that they could no longer stand a slave’s treatment. It was because they were treated as beasts, living their days not knowing tomorrow that they determined it far better to throw

themselves into a desperate struggle for their freedom despite the likelihood of losing their lives.

To say that freedom was standing before their eyes.

Orba viewed their faces in turn. Amongst them was Miguel Tes, whom he'd exchanged swords with at the founding festival. A man who displayed splendidly nimble skill during the uproar. Around his twenties, a handsomely faced swordsman originally not a sword slave, but fallen to one for the crime of attempted rebellion. If it were Pashir or Miguel, even if he gave them soldiers this instant, they would still carry out their respective duties, or so Gowen asserted.

"Stand, Pashir."

Orba commanded, and then a soldier to whom he had given detailed instructions beforehand approached Pashir and undid his shackles. As Pashir stood up eyeing Orba suspiciously, another soldier came over carrying a complete Mephian outfit. Light armour, a steel helmet, and boots.

"Those are for you."

"What?"

"I appoint you head of the slave corps. If you don't like being called the slave corps, then Imperial Guard-supervised independent infantry unit. I'll permit freedom within Apta to you alone. Be sure to watch over everyone."

"Wait a second—Er, I-If you could wait. Why only me...?"

"I said it. You're no longer a slave but a commanding officer of the foot soldiers. You also get a stipend. But you also have a responsibility to follow my orders. In the case you go against me, you will be judged by the Mephian law and I."

Orba noisily paced back and forth in front of Pashir. Every one of the slaves watched over this development dumbfoundedly.

Possibly understanding the implied meaning Orba made—or rather, it would be Gil to him— his face reddened, then paled instead.

The slaves' lives rested on his shoulders. Though he was permitted freedom, were he to try fleeing from Apta, responsibility would of course be pushed over to the slaves and they'd be executed. And also, they were no longer conspiring to rebel. No matter how much Pashir hated Gil and Orba, he wouldn't easily throw away the freedom dangling in front of the other slaves, and he wasn't foolish enough to commit such acts that would involve them in.

"Mira."

At that point, Orba called out Mira and had her help fit Pashir's outfit. Amidst the strange ruling silence, after Pashir was outfitted as a swordsman, Orba drew his own sword from his waist. A light swish accompanying the swing, the tip of the sword pressed against Pashir's neck.

"I'll give this sword to you," Orba said in a whisper. "Wield it only to protect your own body and when I give you my orders. This sword is to kill enemies. But depending on how you use it, it might kill you. Your life, your personality, your entire dignity."

"_"

Pashir remained silent. His animalistic, pointed eyes fixed on Orba with traces of doubt and unrest he was unable to keep off his face. However, he was no more disturbed than necessary.

He's a hard to get man.

Able, and a man capable of standing at the centre of a group sharing the same goal.

“I’ll have Mira guide you to your own room. It also has an exclusive bed, though it might be a bit hard.”

“Prince, did you bother testing it yourself?”

Shique, who had been watching the entire conversation, interrupted. Orba laughed.

“It’s much better than sleeping outside. That’s no place to bring a woman along.”

Indifferent to the blushing Mira and leaving the rest to the soldiers, Orba left the training site.

Orba immersed himself in his own tasks oblivious to the whispered rumours in the streets and fortress interiors.

The next day, he left the fortress in the early morning. Together with Bane and several imperial guards, he made the rounds inspecting within Apta.

Because the prince had personally gone out, the neighbouring villages were pressed to greet him. To further note, their group included a single noble who had accompanied them from Solon and was appointed as the Apta administrative official, charged with management of the forest resources. He was Kalgan, third son of Julius, feudal lord of Idoro. Kalgan, who had experience in logging as well as lumbering, met with the so-called lumbermen groups at the villages.

“Your highness, I’ve been thinking of gathering the leaders from all the villages and creating an ordered system from scratch.”

“I’ll leave it in your hands.”

Until two years ago, Kalgan had been commander of the supply division serving the veteran general, Rogue Saian. However, he had suffered an injury to his right leg in the war with Garbera and had been removed from the front lines since then. Nobles who did not succeed the house either became soldiers or their family’s assistant. With a low outlook and an absence of a satisfying job, the prince had come in to personally nominate him and assign him this post. Many of those carrying out the administrative duties were nobles sharing similar circumstances to Kalgan’s.

Of course, this was also a result of the information Orba collected inside the royal palace. In this way, he collected those who strived to better themselves and aspired to work. Particularly, this was a chance where they might be recognised by the prince, and thus steal a march ahead of their brothers who had succeeded the house. Each of them burned with zeal.

“There was someone called Peewee the Piper,” Orba mentioned to Gowen at the time they listed the officers and sons of nobles that would travel with them to Apta.

“A person with absolutely no skill in using a sword or gun, only good with his tongue. No one paid him any attention, but his lies held a certain mastery to them. I dispatched him to propagate false information against Guhl. Peewee was enthusiastic and did a great job with it. For those like him, it was exactly because no one else recognised them that getting them to think there was someone who paid them attention became their greatest driving force to work.”

“I get what you’re saying. My years of experience have proven that without a doubt.”

Having also received Gowen's approval, Kalgan's name had been added to the list amongst the names of the many old men already crossed out.

Outwardly, Orba feigned the carefree fool seeming to enjoy himself in the villages' warm reception.

There isn't anyone I know, huh.

Just a little farther and he'd reach his hometown village. Of course, it didn't exist now, and even if it did there likely wouldn't be a single person he recognised there. But he wanted to see it with his own eyes, to set foot on it with his own feet.

The last time was when I went to bring mom back was it.

At that time, he was attacked by some run-of-the-mill soldiers and saved by Ryucown. And pulling his mother's hand, he escaped to the next neighbouring village, which Oubary's unit set fire to.

Orba glanced to the side at Bane, whom he had brought along with him. He was being offered wine by the villagers and grinning broadly. It appeared there wasn't a single ripple in his emotions at how he had once burned down these people with his own hands.

"By the way Orba," Gowen secretly whispered into his ears. "Why did you purposely have Shique and the others go separate places at the same time? It's dangerous with the bandits appearing around here. Isn't it better to have them patrol together?"

About the same time Orba's group left the fortress, he had sent Shique and a separate party of Imperial Guards southwards. Krau, the slave girl he borrowed from Zaj, and Pashir were also with them.

"Because it would draw more attention to our grand departure. We don't want them suspecting their objective."

“You speak like there’s a spy amongst us.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if there was. With the evacuation of the Garberan people, Apta should be flooded with people coming in and out these few days.”

“Your wit’s hard at work.”

“Stop it. —And also, have you noticed?”

“What?”

“The villages haven’t spoken about any bandits.”

After making a face of realisation, Gowen looked at Orba with eyes as if he’d seen something dreadful.

“...Certainly, if a group of bandits big enough to attack a merchant ship is roaming around, there’d be a high chance the villages would suffer damage. Or, even supposing that they weren’t attacked, they’d be driven by the unease of having an armed group of that size in their territory. And in spite of that, they have not uttered a single word to Apta’s new feudal lord, the prince.”

“Which would mean this strays outside of Zaj’s predictions. They’re no washed-up thugs from the west. Most likely, they’re Mephians.”

Their group returned to the fortress before sunset.

In front of the castle gates, they came across Shique and the rest who likewise appeared to be returning.

“How did it go?”

“My lord, I’m dead tired.”

Krau said, her body certainly fatigued. But as she delivered today's results to Orba with her hands, his eyes lit up.

"You did a great job. Feast to your heart's content. Pashir, you worked hard as well."

"...No, it was no trouble."

At that time, Orba spotted a strange sight at the garden near the castle gates. Several swords were thrust into the ground. He assumed it was likely some master swordsmith burying his failed works. However, that wasn't anything of concern to him. There were many things he still needed to do.

And from up above in a spire, Noue Salzantes intently observed their situation.

Part 3

The next day, the Garberan garrisoned troops Noue led departed. Orba stood alongside Vileena seeing them off, and immediately afterwards, went all the way to the fortress' defensive walls and ascended one of the scattered spires, from which he commanded a full view looking down on the long queue of soldiers.

The number of wagons were recklessly many. The things they needed for living at the fortress should have been sent back to Garbera beforehand, so the majority of them appeared to be food provisions. A smile unknowingly crept onto Orba's face. Those numbers definitively changed Orba's prediction to conviction.

"Orba."

Gowen called out to him with a stern expression. Without turning around, Orba spoke to him.

“So the preparations are ready?”

“For the time being, it’s as you stated. I’ve never wanted your prediction to be wrong this much. See if there wasn’t a mistake in the process. Apta is…”

“This was a gamble with stacked odds from the start.” Orba affirmed, tapping the scabbard of the sword hanging from his waist. “Now, why don’t you make a better face, Gowen. Just as you would when seeing off the slaves to the place where they kill each other.”

Saying this, Orba finally turned around. His face was flushed, his eyes shining with ferocity. Gowen’s face turned unpleasant.

“If you turn the entire mobile force into a diversion as part of your clever scheme, we’ll have no main force here. Being sly is great, but in order to accomplish that, we need a main force. Fooling the enemy is good and all, but there’s no ‘core’ to your plan.”

Speaking as if war would break out tomorrow or even today, Orba also readily accepted those words.

“If we have no main force, then *they* will come.”

The sky was clear. The refreshing forest breeze brushed against Orba’s cheek, his spirit already gone to the battlefield.

That day passed by without any trouble.

Orba no longer held banquets like those previously, but his lightsome mood was transmitted to the soldiers aplenty and they set out to their entertainment every evening, here as well. What was more, their manner was the very meaning of arrogance. To the Aptan people, they felt the

Garberan soldiers who maintained command were several times better, and unease gradually spread amongst the citizens.

Then, the following evening.

Two young men dispatched from the Black Armoured Division, Rynas and Vran, tried to go outside the castle gates. Both were gunners. They were off duty tonight, but their colleagues that should have been stationed on watch were already long gone on their excursion. But there wasn't bound to be any enemy attack at any rate, so they didn't worry too much over it and were on their way to go drinking.

"You two, could you come here for a bit?"

The ones who called out to them were the Imperial Guards, sitting in chairs around a table in the garden near the gate and amusing themselves in a game of cards.

"Is there something you need?"

Rynas was courteous, but position wise, knowing his opponents were former slaves, he naturally didn't care to hide the contempt from his face.

"We're a tad short on players for menko[1]. Would you care to join us?"

"No, we're—"

"We've received quite the sum of war funds from the prince. How about it? A single game if you will."

The imperial guard took out a leather bag and placed it on the table. It landed with a thump. Rynas and Vran exchanged glances. In going out, money would of course be needed.

"Sounds interesting."

Vran nodded and Rynas also joined their company.

“That’s how it’s gotta be.”

The imperial guard Aeson smiled and pulling out two chairs, urged them to sit.

South of Apta, within the Tsaga mines. In the maze-like complex of ravines, a single dragonstone ship advanced. It was a cruiser class airship, and at best flew ten metres above the ground give or take. Amidst the sky and ground blending into a leaden hue immediately following sunset, where not a single living sound was made save the panicked cries of the birds flying away, a large number of people were in fact concealed. Their heads protruded over the crags, carefully watching the ship flying several metres below them. In their hands were guns. Beside them were small airships, prepped and ready for them to jump on and take off at a moment’s notice. No matter who, anyone would see them as a group of bandits about to attack the ship. However, in the end they did nothing, only holding their breaths in stillness and looking down at the ship as it continued on past their view.

And from there, separating Apta to its north was an oblongly stretched forest. That area, normally barren of men’s presences, for some reason held large numbers of shadows shifting about. And on their waists were the glint of swords and guns. They had prepared their evening meal, but without using fire so that fumes wouldn’t rise into the air, only eating readied simple dried foods. Using no lighting, they simply gathered, exchanging subdued voices, their silhouettes quite surely ominous. Any traveller happening to glimpse upon this scene would likely be struck with terror and view it as a group of the forest’s ghosts wordlessly holding a banquet.

And then—

Vileena Owell at that time came out to the balcony of her allotted fortress room. The southern forest could be seen across the urban contours under the starlight. She breathed a small sigh as her hair swayed in the wind.

His imperial highness, and Hou Ran—

She could not forget the scene she witnessed the time they were attacked by bandits on their journey to Apta. The smile Gil Mephius directed towards that girl. It was one Vileena had never seen. On asking, she found out that Hou Ran had become part of the imperial guards after the ceremony at Seirin Valley. And yet, they appeared to be longtime acquaintances.

If I ask Theresia, she'll surely suspect this as jealousy between a man and woman.

At that time, the prince trusted Hou Ran from the bottom of his heart. When they were being fired on, even if the dragons would run amok, he was sure things would somehow work out if Ran was there—thinking this, he personally led his unit to chase after the bandits. And sure enough, Ran met his expectations. Wasn't that the reason why when Gil rejoined them, he showed her that smile?

Vileena found their relationship a little dazzling. She didn't know what could have happened that would cause that unimpressionable, that mysterious prince to place his full trust in Ran. The current Vileena wondered if she could ever become an existence like her. And if she *did* happen to become one, wouldn't she then be able to move the prince as she willed?

Presently, Gil Mephius was once again taking indefinable actions. ‘Was his merrymaking behaviour simply not for show?’ she thought. Countlessly taken by surprise in this way, Vileena’s opinion of Gil changed.

A man I cannot let my guard down around.

Just as she had only recently written in the letter to her grandfather. It would be no wonder if Ax Bazgan’s subordinates were nonchalantly passing their days to guarantee the large flux of people moving in and out of the city. She could imagine this as one of Orba’s methods to make them lower their guard.

But what does he hope to gain by lowering their guard? It’s one thing if our forces were twice theirs. Rather, shouldn’t he be putting up a front to tell them our defenses are solid?

Her questions were endless. Although she told herself she would try believing in the prince this time, just thinking about it gave rise to her inner turmoil.

Am I the poisonous snake set loose from Garbera, or the crown prince’s wife accustomed to Mephius?

Her unsteady, trembling feet constantly shook the very core of her heart. Would it have been better were the prince really feebleminded and a man she could bend to her will? What was she hesitating over?

Ahh, I can’t have this. That I, Vileena Owell, would fall to tatters like this. Grandfather will scold me.

Since she was young, Vileena had believed that if she were born a knight, she would have handled the sword better than any knight, strategised better than any commander, supported her grandfather, achieved

beyond her father's expectations, and made Garbera the continent's top country.

Not only am I unable to discipline a single prince rumoured as a fool for my country's welfare, but I spend these days handled by him instead.

The anxiety and impatience gnawing away at her small chest only grew stronger.

She oh so very much wanted to return to Garbera. And if she were to ride an airship crossing this night sky to meet him...Surely her grandfather would be mad and say something like 'Why did you shamelessly run away and come back?'. Even then, she didn't mind. She wanted to see her grandfather, father, and mother and even wanted that scolding.

To think I would end up like this.

A weak, lonely pampered child.

"Seeing you like this," Theresia spoke from behind her, "is like seeing a fourteen, fifteen year maiden consumed with the anguishes of adolescence."

"I am a trifle little girl with nothing special about her. I don't need to be told that."

"Again, saying things unlike you. Come now princess, your tea is ready."

"Theresia, what exactly is it that I should do?"

The young girl asked, sounding distant as she gazed at the stars.

"Well, that's something only the princess can understand."

"I do plan to understand my own feelings myself. But that 'self' feels like there are several people inside and it makes me nauseous. Each of them say different things that I don't know which one is my real 'self'."

“Does that not mean that you’re becoming an adult? It pains me to say it means that pure ‘self’ of your childhood has ended.”

“My pure sel—”

As Vileena began to repeat her words, her mouth suddenly stopped.

“Is something the matter?”

“No….I remember having this kind of talk with grandfather before; of how a person no longer remains their natural, born self, because at some point they form one, two, or sometimes over ten ‘different selves’. That sometimes, they’re created because of responsibilities or official positions.”

Vileena remembered being too young at the time to understand her grandfather’s words. However, thinking back now, wasn’t it a royal family member’s resolve that he was teaching her?

As Vileena tried to recall the details of the conversation, she was swept by a tremor under her feet.

Losing her footing, she immediately witnessed a cloud of rising dust. It was in front of the gate interposed between the city districts.

“Princess?”

Sensing something amiss, Theresia came running over. Vileena did not move, only standing, her eyes opened wide.

“That is—”

Further south of the gates within the dim stretched forest, small orbs of fire appeared in succession.

The enemy! Vileena sensed.

Those were likely the flames of their handheld torches. The body of flames twisted in a line like a big snake slithering out of the forest. They had advanced secretly through the forest, but faster than Vileena could finish this thought, two, three cannon shots howled through the night sky.

“E-Enemy attack! Enemy attack, enemy attack!!”

Cries that cut through the still night immediately followed.

“The gate’s being bombarded!”

“Send for the horses!”

Cries mingled within the fortress. The urban districts were also wrapped in a large clamour as they saw the queue of men surge towards the fortress. The tranquil night was broken, and even the soft-blowing winds became a threatening gust that stung their skin.

“Princess! Are you hurt?”

Running in was Shique, the imperial guard.

“How is the Mephius army faring?”

More than worrying about her own safety, she questioned Shique about the force of enemy soldiers that had just drawn close.

“P-Princess,” Theresia began, as if to stop her.

“Why have you allowed the enemy to come this close so easily? What of the soldiers assigned to the gates? What about the airship unit on lookout?”

“F-For now, please follow me. My duty is in leading the princess to a safe location.”

“I’m fine. More importantly, I will go to the airship launching site. If we don’t rouse the soldiers—”

Vileena cried out, shaking off Shique’s hand by force. “Hm?” she furrowed her graceful brows. Another cannon shot sounded from the balcony.

“Shique, weren’t you a bit too fast in coming here?”

“__”

“Don’t tell me…”

When Vileena suddenly turned around, the tip of the flames that took on the shape of a huge snake drew immediately before the outer walls.

The figures appearing from the forest were a band of swordsmen, their faces concealed by front pointed helmets[2] and donning the Zerdians’ characteristic metal armour. The cannons were positioned on a hill within the forest and bombarded the south gates and battery emplacement protruding in the southeast.

The streets and fort fell into a confusion as it became littered with holes, but the enemy forces hadn’t come out.

The attacker’s commander Natokk broke into a grin beneath his helmet. He had light coloured-skin and a hawk-shaped face, features that could be found in the common Zerdian.

“It’s exactly as the information said. Those Mephian morons have drunken themselves silly and are still slumbering away.”

The Mephians showed signs of readying to intercept their attacks, but a quickened strike would settle that.

Natokk signaled for consecutive fire. A hole tore open in the outer walls before his sharp eyes, and the gate's reinforced watchtowers toppled over. The residents' screams soared past the fortress walls, resounding in Natokk's ears.

Pulling off the string on his scabbard, he drew a slightly curved sword.

"We the main force shall proceed towards the southern gate. Shadam, take command of the gunning unit and foot soldiers, and standby on the east side. Engage any enemy who comes out."

"Sir!"

His adjutant, face roasted in the colour of flames, was beside him.

"If the enemy pushes out, engage them accordingly and retreat to the forest."

He was already aware Apta Fortress had a shortage of forces. His spies who had slipped into the city districts had done right. With the evacuation of the Garberan forces, the main force within Apta likely didn't even amount to five hundred. The soldiers Natokk was leading were also a few three hundred, but the cruiser that ferried them here had returned back, after which it would be fully loaded again and heading this way. The ship would drop the troops, following which the unit would advance north through the forest, passing east of Natokk, and commence an attack on Apta from the north. Should the enemy focus their forces on Natokk, they would suffer a pincer attack.

That's our strategist, Ravan-dono for you. In a single night, we will finally grasp the coveted Apta in our hands.

Natokk ran his tongue down the tip of his blade.

On the other end, the inside of Apta was as Natokk saw, at the height of confusion. The soldiers rushing out in great hurry were all half armed, and the cavalry stationed in the east and south gates were hindered by the fleeing citizens and unable to advance forward.

The artillery battery projecting southeast of Apta finally fired back, but the artillery duel did not continue for long. The main force that had crashed through the main gates ascended the hills, crossed the trenches, and began penetrating into the fortress interiors.

When they entered the gates, it was no surprise that soldiers came running down the steps on both sides in a panic. However, even with numbers, even in force, they were no opponent for Natokk. A bullet was fired, and then a second shot. And by the tenth shot they had lost their composure and scrambled to escape.

“This...so there wasn’t even a need for a second force.”

There wasn’t a need to go as far as to pry the second gate open through brute force. Natokk planned to move through the fortress passages towards the fixed batteries and subdue the enemy artillery. If he turned the cannons towards the city and fired them, it would intensify enemy mayhem.

Sending a few elites towards the batteries, Natokk and his main force intercepted the enemy in the gate interior.

However, shortly after a messenger of the elite force kneeled before Natokk’s eyes. It seemed the enemy airships had appeared and they were currently exchanging fire. That infantrymen were being carried one after another atop the fortress walls signalled they were also converging towards the batteries.

The enemy had finally made its move. Information that a unit of footmen were approaching from the front had also arrived. But that was still within the margin. A part of him considered a full-frontal confrontation using his main force, but Natokk was not such an incompetent man to be driven by his desires and lose himself in his mission. The one making light of the enemy was not him, but rather, Mephius.

“Okay, pull back while returning fire. Have them fire the cannons one more time and provide cover!”

Quickly handing down his decision, he signaled his force to fall back from the southern gate. A group of the enemy foot soldiers, maybe convinced of their victory, came outside the fortress. Here, for the first time both sides’ naked swords clashed. The man standing as the enemy’s vanguard was fairly skilled. He made a timely sidestep as two of Nattock’s men lunged at him, and he sunk his sword into their neck and chest.

As Natokk had his men engage them in melee, he gave out the signal to regroup with the soldiers in the east bank while ascertaining a path of escape.

Everything was going according to plan.

References and Translation Notes

□ □ A japanese card game. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menko

□ Similar to a samurai helmet

Chapter 4: Defend Apta to the Last

Part 1

During that time, there was a group proceeding south through the forest towards Apta.

They were a band of men on horseback. They all leaned over their horses, riding at a tremendous speed that cut through the wind.

Their numbers were probably over three hundred. Riding their horses at night, and what was more through the forest, it would be an impossible feat had they not been familiar with the terrain. ‘They’ had determined their route beforehand, even taking the time to chop down the obstructing trees in hopes that this moment would come.

“Yah!”

“Se!”

They wordlessly sped forward, only raising their voices so as to urge their horses on. The horses’ muscles pulsated and each time their backs bobbed up and down, the long-swords and spears hanging from their waists and placed onthe horses’ saddles struck their own armours with a ringing clang.

“Mmh?”

The rider in front suddenly lifted his lantern.

“Stop.”

Raising his voice, he pulled on his reins.

They were in an opening of trees that spread to open a circular plain. There, likewise hoisting their lamps upwards and standing in wait were

several men. They were covered in hoods, and their real identities were insurmisable from their attire.

“Who are you?” the leading horseman asked.

The men behind him brought their spears and guns to their hands. For a while, the horses’ rough breaths jarred their ears. And then,

“You are all Garberans, are you not?”

“What?!”

The group of horsemen grew agitated at suddenly being recognised. The leading man—Noue Salzantes—waved his hand and restrained their outbursts.

“And you men would be?”

“Salzantes-dono, we have been awaiting you,” one of the waiting men said, ignoring the question. “We expect you to understand our business here.”

“_”

Noue did not speak. His face was far superior to the average beauty's, his lips slightly pursed, and his expression emotionless. Lit dimly under the cover of the night, his appearance emitted an uncanny eeriness.

“Our respective enemies are one and the same.” The hooded man said in an emotionless voice. “If you would, allow us to accompany you.”

Riding the tide of pursuit, soldiers rushed out of Apta Fortress in succession.

Gunfire rained down furiously from the airships and battlements.

“Retreat to the forest! Then they won’t be able use their airships!”

While having his gunners provide cover, Natokk gradually pulled his troops back. The enemy infantry seemed to have their share of impressive warriors, though sadly they didn’t seem too familiar with working together. Engaging them while retreating didn’t prove difficult.

Mephius’ first prince, Gil Mephius—was it.

Natokk conjured the name of the enemy commander. A man whose name had recently spread across the four directions. But in a free-for-all fight, this was all he lived up to be. In the end he was nothing more than a sheltered, spoiled child. Compared to that, Natokk had countlessly roamed the battlefield. The number of life-or-death battles they each experienced were different.

As swords mingled with spears, blood shed, and bullets bored holes into the ground, the enemy forces pushed forward. So far everything was perfectly according to plan.

And then,

They’ve come.

Natokk’s expression turned to delight. Cries resounded north of Apta. The secondary force that had detoured north of Apta had finally begun the pincer attack. Drunk in conviction of their victory, he began to signal for a counterattack with a large swing of his hand.

“What?!”

It was only a matter of seconds before his delight became a shade of unrest.

From the north along the castle walls, a group of cavalry came riding. They were no ally of Natokk. The hoisted flag they were waving was, to

think of all things, the Garberan emblem. They passed the Mephius infantry, charging Natokk's way. He went into a panic.

Impossible! Weren't they supposed to have evacuated the day before yesterday?!

"Retreat!"

This was no time to get flustered. If they entered the forest, they could slow the airships and horses' pursuit. Natokk's main force, even under this situation, worked together and continued retreating to the forest. The Mephian infantry were hot on their heels.

"Commander, leave this to us."

Several soldiers shouted determinedly and moved to block the enemy's pursuit. A series of clashes rang immediately near Natokk. Biting his lips, he ordered the remaining soldiers to retreat.

I would've never thought they were in league with Garbera to this extent.

Mephius and Garbera had been warring for ten years. They may have been weary of war and thus formed an alliance, but their ties should have been anything but firm. To think that they would purposely make themselves seemingly withdraw and lay low. *I was read,* Natokk thought, grinding his teeth. That thought now materialised before his eyes.

"Halt!"

This time was an ambush in Natokk's path of retreat. A party of gunners on high ground stood in a row, fixing their aim. The one who called them to halt was a man wearing an iron mask.

"Your reinforcements won't come. We've shot down your cruiser. It seems they ran for their dear lives back to Taúlia, but it's clear they won't afford any soldiers for you."

Natokk began to open his mouth, as if about to scream something. His aide, Shadam, took out his gun and began to aim at the masked man, as if lured by his commander's force. The one to lower that hand, however, was Natokk himself.

"Commander!"

"—Leave it. His words aren't lies."

By knowing about the cruiser and the secondary force, the enemy had completely grasped their movements. Despite Natokk being completely convinced of his victory only a few minutes ago, he now felt like a trapped rat.

"We intended to snare the enemy into our trap—"

But instead, they were the ones snared before their very eyes. Natokk threw down his own weapons, and then spoke.

"I won't ask anything for myself, who proclaimed war with you and advanced my troops against yours. I'm not asking much, but if you could, please be easy on my men."

"Very well."

The masked man nodded in assent.

Orba watched silently below him as the Zerdians who had surrendered their weapons were arrested. The one for whom everything had gone according to plan was not to them, but Orba.

At that time, an airship carrying the Imperial Guard Gowen came. He was the one who handled the enemies approaching the east gate. Jumping down from the ship,

“It went as you predicted.”

“Yeah. A surprise attack immediately after Garbera had evacuated is the ideal timing. On the other hand, if they hadn’t come *here*, it would make the rumour that Ax Bazgan was aiming for Apta groundless.”

“So you read beyond the enemy’s reinforcements and strategy, huh.”

After analysing the information he gained from Zaj Haman, Orba predicted that if the enemy were to come attacking, it would be by passing through the southern Tsaga Mines. They would undoubtedly load soldiers onto their cruiser and drop them by the forest to the south of Apta.

Orba had Krau and Pashir, who were familiar with its geographical features, re-inspect the area and create a detailed map. He had originally planned to lay the majority of his forces there in wait, but on the off chance the enemy advanced through a different route, the fortress would be wide open, not to mention there were no suitable places to lay such a large army in wait to start with.

So instead, with Orba himself in command, he left only a few dozen skilled shooters there. Using an airship as messenger, Orba discovered the enemy was carrying soldiers with only a single cruiser; however, the enemy numbers were insufficient.

They’re going to carry soldiers here a second time.

Which in that case, naturally meant he could see through the enemy’s strategy. Orba gave them their instructions for the timing at which to shoot down the second transport.

Aiming for the the airship silently traveling through the deep gorge, they bathed it in a furious volley on Orba’s single command. There was only a single location they could set their cannons, but the ship's armour would

suredly need to be thinned to fully accommodate a cruiser filled with soldiers that could maintain the ship's weight and ether propulsion balanced. While it was indeed a large ship, at point-blank even bullets were effective.

Taúlia's air carrier descended into chaos, their enemy unseen before them. It took all they could to open the gunports on the ship's hull and return fire haphazardly. Firing from its decks and lower compartments, the carrier turned heel running back on the path they'd just come up.

Orba didn't risk pursuit, and leading his men, immediately rushed back to Apta.

"...And expecting Noue's reinforcements to come, you laid your forces in wait, huh."

Gowen eyed him suspiciously in thought.

"It's almost as if you two had arranged this. But it's a fact you and Noue barely met in Apta."

"If that could've happened, things would have gone more easily," Orba said with a strangely boyish laugh. "But I knew he would likely be thinking of creating a debt of gratitude for me. A man of Noue's calibre should be aware of Ax Bazgan's movements targeting Apta, and also understand what timing they would launch an attack."

The seemingly excessive provisions he left Apta with was proof of that. They were making it seem that they were returning to Garbera, while actually concealing themselves in the forest waiting for Ax to move. That was why Orba sent his imperial guards to the road the Garberans used, had them wait for the most effective timing for a pincer move, then led them in.

“Noue’s calibre as a man aside, there’s no way you two are even that close.”

“Rumours, information, and lastly intuition.”

Gowen never stopped making his ‘I just don’t get it’ face.

Before long, the Garberan knights arrived. Leading them up front was, of course, Noue Salzantes. He swooped down from his horse and facing Orba, made a bow. Orba did the same, and then they descended off the high ground.

“Orba-dono is it. It has been since Solon—or so I would like to say, but you probably do not know me. I was cheering for you in the grand stadium, so I assumed us acquaintances against my better judgment.”

Cheering? Aren’t you mistaking it for cursing?

Prince Gil, and also the masked gladiator Orba. Both of whom were culprits that had torn his drawn-out plans asunder.

“However, this is...even I must take my hat off to you. I honestly wondered what you could do with your size of forces, but I would have never imagined you would make the enemy fall into your trap so magnificently.”

“It’s because we had the assistance of Lord Noue and the Garberan knights that we could make it happen.”

“As one whose movements were noticed, I can only see that as irony.”

“Wasn’t that because the prince’s belief in Sir Salzantes’ chivalrous spirit and faith in Garbera?” Orba added.

Ha! Gowen seemed to say silently on his face. After all, Orba was saying things he didn’t really mean.

“Mmnm,” Noue nodded. Whether it was because he was concealing his emotions, there was a trace of fatigue on his face. “Well, nevermind that. More importantly, I would like to request a meeting with the prince.”

“Acknowledged. Fellow knights as well, by all means head to Apta. Enjoy a night’s stay.”

“We shall take you up on that offer.”

Orba, saying he was ‘going to report to the prince’, hopped onto the airship prepared behind him. After ordering the pilot, the plane gently took off.

In the forest below him, how many were injured and crouching, or worse, how many lay scattered dead? The fortress front gates were the same.

The number of Mephian casualties was greater than that of the defeated Zerdians.

“__”

Some sort of emotion bubbled out of him, and faster than it could form into words, Orba impassively swallowed it.

I knew it already.

The war slaves raising cries of victory—*they* were the infantry who launched themselves from the gates—and as these cheers reached Orba’s ears, Orba only stared straight ahead.

I knew it. That’s why I won’t say anything. I won’t make any excuses.

Part 2

Orba, having temporarily returned to his room, borrowed the help of his page Dinn to become the ‘prince’ in form. He walked the fortress interior, his cape fluttering majestically.

“It’s his highness!”

“Prince Gil!”

Crossing a corridor opening towards the town districts, what he saw below were the citizens waving their hands and calling out his name, praising him for this victory.

Despite it being deep into the night, the succession of the sudden bombardment, enemy attack, and dramatic turnaround victory all happening without giving them any time to grasp the situation left the majority now wide awake.

Orba waved to them smilingly, and at the same time gave a sharp glare at the regular soldiers who dumbfoundedly looked his way.

“During the fighting, I didn’t even see a single one of the regular soldiers supposed to be on duty!”

Orba barked angrily at several of the regular soldiers nearby.

“Are those swords and guns you carry on your waists for decoration?! Then I might as well hang you bare naked together with them on the castle walls!!”

Leaving behind these words that sent the soldiers who heard them into a tremble, Orba headed towards the western spire.

There at the very top in a small room that formed the roof of the tower, Noue awaited.

Declaring himself to the official, Orba entered and Noue stood up to greet him.

He wore a slight expression of surprise that Gil had come unaccompanied.

“This way talking will be easier.” Orba said, understanding Noue’s surprise. “Would you like a drink?”

“No. If anything, I’ll have one after our talk.”

“I understand,” Orba nodded. He commanded the chamberlain attending to Noue to retire, and it was now only the two of them.

Both said nothing for some time. They were surrounded by four pillars at the corners and a railing lower enough that even the flickering town lights could be seen. Movements near the main gate were particularly striking.

There the townspeople had taken it upon themselves to assist in the repairs throughout the night.

Ahem, Noue Salzantes cleared his throat.

“Your highness, do you possess clairvoyance?”

“Well,” Orba began, shaking his head with a straight face, “Wouldn’t that be you, Lord Salzantes?”

“It shames me to say. To be honest, I admit to having somewhat of a power to see through things. However, it is hopelessly clouded before your highness. If you don’t mind me openly asking, after we departed from Apta, did you tail my unit?”

“Regarding that, you were also quite strict on the lookout. That was why I just left it to intuition.”

“Your intuition?”

“That you, Noue Salzantes, should be trying to earn my debt of gratitude. That was also why you purposely didn’t disclose anything about Ax Bazgan.”

“Are you saying I would think to make your highness lower your guard?”

“Isn’t that the case?”

Orba said this easily, and without giving him any time to react, slipped into his bosom in a single fluid motion.

“You currently hold misgivings on the war that will occur with Ende in the near future. And the fact that the country of Arion will support them makes it all the more worrying. And in that situation, the allied country of Mephius will become an even more important existence than it is now. But my father, Guhl Mephius, also aims to get closer to Ende. For you, this is a grave crisis that will determine the life or death of your nation.”

“...”

All emotion vanished from Noue’s face. He brushed off the hair on his shoulders with his finger.

“Spending our time probing each others’ intentions would only be a waste. So I’ll say it openly. It’s because of that, Salzantes, that you laid low in the forest anticipating Ax’s attack, and returned as reinforcements. It was all to deepen our personal friendship. Am I right?”

“...It is as you’ve discerned, I’m afraid .”

“And?”

Eh?

Noue’s face changed to mirror his thoughts. Orba tilted his head slightly to the side questioningly.

“And? Sure, thanks to Garbera’s reinforcements, Apta was safely defended. And in exchange, what is it that you want me to do?”

“We’d also like you to provide reinforcements for us.”

Noue said faintly irritated, further twiddling his hair. This conversation might in fact have been unbearable for him, as he was usually the one leading the conversations.

“We’d like to receive reinforcements. Or rather, should we go to war, we want a guarantee Mephius will send us reinforcements. If Mephius also joins the fray, Arion will realize it won’t be an easy battle and pull back for the time being. And also, this isn’t a problem for Garbera alone. If they’re able to effortlessly cut down Garbera, Arion will certainly advance its army on towards Mephius, the coastal nations, and even the western lands of Taúlia.”

“Mephius and Garbera. Even with our two countries against it, Arion will be a tough opponent. And if we add Ende on top of that.”

Ende and Arion were both countries who had inherited the sovereign’s lineage, but despite their diplomatic relations, they had never once put up a united front. There was a time in Ende’s history when it was called the Ende Empire, during which it had even crossed swords with Arion’s advance troops. As a result, even if they shared the same interests, it was hard for them to instantly strengthen their alliance. However,

“We received information that last year, the Arion royalty paid visit to Ende in secret. It is likely that it was around that time that Ende was

about to form an alliance with us, Garbera. I believe their visit was a means to prevent that. However, now that our relationship with Ende has been reduced to a blank slate, I wouldn't be too surprised if they were already preparing to form an alliance."

Arion was a large nation with a long history that also bolstering a huge military force. To satisfy the ambitions and avarice of the current king's hegemony, it had subjugated the small countries scattered throughout the east, and after many long years they finally defeated their longtime enemy in the northeast, the religious nation known as the Dytiann Holy Alliance. Having ended its eastern expedition, it was viewed unlikely they would take any large-scale military actions, but it was still more than capable of deploying sizable reinforcements to Ende.

Orba could understand Noue's worries.

"I see now."

Orba stroked his cheek with his finger. After losing the mask, it had practically become a habit, and occasionally he couldn't help confirming the touch of his finger against his warm skin.

And he would, at critical moments like these play those hidden cards he kept in reserve when it came to dealing with someone with at least a bit of wisdom.

"A situation where you're betting the fate of a country. Noue-dono, you're a patriot. Just as the Ryucown I confronted was."

"Your highness."

"In order to protect it you're willing to sacrifice anything. Even the life of a princess loved by her country and adored by all her subjects."

Orba clearly understood from Noue's gulp. He stood up from his seat, and turning his back to Noue, leaned against the railing.

“The princess may still be a Garberan. But in a matter of time she will be my wife. If it were *then*, Lord Noue, I wouldn’t have forgiven you. It would seem luck was on your side.”

“Y-Your highness.”

Turning around, Noue had his brows furrowed and appeared to be sending a look of disapproval his way instead. No, he really was. It was a fact Noue had spurred Zaat and the slaves in the Solon capital to aim for the princess’ life. And most likely, Noue should have admitted that Orba not only knew about that, but was the one who stopped it. Being aware of that, he still stood off against him in the Apta transfer and foolishly tried to gain his favour.

This guy, just how much of an idiot can he be?

Those feelings could be seen flashing across his face. It was because everything they needed to hide had already been exposed, and they both knew it.

“I believe I did say we should try speaking openly, Lord Noue. I’m at a loss. I do like setting traps and outwitting those I deem enemies, but doing *that* to those I could affiliate in the future is not to my liking. Lord Noue, I won’t mind if you still want to continue *that*, but the both of us will earn very little from it.”

“Your highness, where are you heading?”

Noue stood up and asked as Orba prepared to leave the room.

“If it’s time you need, I’ll give it to you. It’s fortunate Garbera hasn’t many forests that you can pass through without worry of the evening dew, so you should still have provisions left. If you’ll excuse me, I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

Forcing his exit, Orba descended from the tower.

What Orba who was now required to put up a front everyday revealed to Noue was only half what he meant. He didn't believe he could negotiate without any decent preparations when facing an opponent as sharp as Noue.

The Garberan troops, of course, also can't just stay here like this.

His thoughts never ceased as he climbed down the stairs. Even while smiling at the people who called out 'Your Highness!' to him, his mind had yet to depart from the battlefield.

Next, is how Ax will move. There's no way he'll stay back and sit tight, and the possibility they realized there's no rear guard is high.

If he were in Ax's position, what would be do? However, even as Orba immersed himself in that thought, there was still another immediate problem he needed to settle.

The next day, Orba went out to do an inspection of the town and after checking over the repairs on the gates and southern batteries, he assembled the commanding officers in the fortress courtyard.

The regular soldiers that served Oubary and Odyne, Gowen and the Imperial Guards, and Pashir and the sword slaves.

Calling on the names of the soldiers who reaped merits in the battle last night, he directly handed them their reward. Of course, the majority were imperial guards and Pashir's infantry whom Orba had given orders to beforehand.

"Next. Is there anyone else?" Orba said, looking at their faces. "Step up if there is."

The regular soldiers averted their eyes seeming uncomfortable. The majority had either gone out to play and not come back on time, or had been stricken in fear by the enemy's sudden attack, that none managed to crossed swords with the enemy.

"Your highness."

Stepping in at that point was the imperial guard, Aeson.

"What is it? I'm sure I awarded you more than enough money."

"No, these two here, Rinus and Bran. They are from the Black Armoured Division, but joined forces with us and have contributed greatly."

"Really. I've remembered your names. I will tell how within General Oubary's Black Armoured Division, you two are the bravest warriors."

Orba broke into a big grin, and without an ounce of reluctance, handed the monetary recompense to the two who contrastingly advanced forward timidly and reluctantly. Strictly speaking, these two had also been about to go out on the town when Aeson called them to a stop. This too had been under Orba's orders.

"Why go out of the way?"

Shique asked, some thirty minutes later, in the prince's private room.

"I mean, I do understand what you're doing. You're trying to make it seem the munificent prince measures value through performance. Especially those in the regular troops, seeing their own friends luckily taking part in the spoils, they would certainly think 'Next time, that will be me'."

"If you understand that much there shouldn't be any problem, right?"

Orba currently held a late afternoon meal in his hand while stooped over a book spread open on the table.

“No, there should’ve been more effective ways. If you had also taught the regulars about the strategy, wouldn’t the battle have been just a bit easier, and the regulars moved by the prince’s abilities?”

“People exhibit their abilities strongest when putting their life on the line.”

Dinn, seeing Orba about to flip the page with his sauce-covered hands, uttered a sigh and moved to undertake the task in his stead.

“With only that, it won’t end with them growing desperate. Bitter and having lost face, they’ll put more effort into those sword-clasped hands and trigger-wrapped fingers, all so that they might get recognised the next time around.”

“You’ve become quite the tactician,” Gowen remarked sarcastically.

“About that,” Orba said, not directly responding to his remark, “I was only thinking that if things turned into a serious fight, I’d need to make the enemy cautious and at the same time spread that same caution, or an even greater one to our own men.”

Some time after, Shique said to Gowen.

“It’s probably because Orba has a good nose.”

“A good nose?”

“How should I put it. If there are ten things happening in a given situation, there are those who might be able to see nine of them but are completely unable to imagine that last one. And then there are people who by seeing just two or three are able to foresee the remaining entirety. In Orba’s case, he foresees, or it might be more appropriate to

say he instinctually sniffs them out. It's something I often see from him. We're always taken by surprise by the bold moves he makes, but in order to even make that single move, he pays extremely careful attention to everything around him and stores up information. And on top of that, he possesses a primal, or rather, characteristically sharp intuition. It's easy to be mistaken because of his thoughtlessly excellent sword skills, but he was never someone destined to finish as a simple swordsman."

"But you know," Gowen said, crossing his big arms as he looked up at the sky, "I don't feel it's a good thing how his view is fixed at looking from above. That would make him the same as the other nobles and imperials."

"What are you saying, Mr. Commander-of-the-Imperial-Guards?" Shique smiled revealing his white teeth. "I on the other hand am having fun. How far up will he, a mere gladiator, climb? Having the pleasure to watch it this close up is reason enough for me to tag along. What about you, Gowen-dono? Why did you choose to follow him?"

"Because I'm tired of raising sword slaves."

Gowen spoke his true feelings, absent of any deceit.

"A view from above, huh. However, even if he's aware of that, if he doesn't attain it...only a world where he can get killed in his sleep awaits him."

Shique finished with a murmur afterwards, as if in soliloquy.

Amongst the Zerdians captured as prisoners of war, most of the soldiers were safely released, although of course, the commander, Natokk, and his adjutant, Shadam, were locked in the dungeon. Orba made no mention of giving them any special interrogation or torture. Except that

he had just visited them once to provide food, and have a chat, almost as if done on a whim.

Natokk was vigilant, and spoke a little of Taúlia in what ways that would cause them no harm. Orba tried to also probe a glimpse of Taúlia's governor-general's character, but as for whether that yielded any results, he himself wasn't quite sure.

Seems he's a well-liked man.

Orba found it odd that in just under two hours of conversation, he was able to grasp a general understanding of the man. No matter how he saw it, Ax did not give off the feeling of a great man. If he remembered correctly, Zaj Haman also said the same.

"He is not a bad man. He is also loved by his people. It's just, he worships the Jasch Bazgan who established Zer Tauran like a god — though I do admit the Taúlian feudal lords have been like that generation after generation — and he believes that Jasch's influence, even now, flows through the entire west. I don't know when, but Ax Bazgan aspires to one day raise a new country himself."

"Do you know of anyone else from Taulia? The saying goes that there's no loss to knowing."

"You're right." Zaat nodded fervently. "Archduke Hergo, who assumes a position similar to adjutant, is already an old man. His adopted son, General Bouwen, is young and spirited, and rumours say he will inevitably marry Ax's daughter, Esmena. But he is not so much that his name would sing tales through the wind. Hmmm. Only..."

"Only?"

"Ax's strategist, Ravan Dol. He works as a dragon handler and is approaching his years, but I hear he's considerably sharp minded. On the

one occasion Taúlia was attacked by Mephius ten years ago and was on the verge of ruin, I've heard the one who issued an appeal to the other states at that time and provided them the strategy that drove away the Mephian army was Ravan Dol. Stories of his genius in taming dragons have also reached my ears."

Ravan Dol.

It was common for the Western Tauran Provinces to, like Mephius, train dragons and employ them in battle. They weren't brought along when Natokk performed the attack on Apta because it would hinder covert manoeuvring, but if their force had come from the front, then Ravan Dol's personally trained dragon squadron would've likely appeared.

And, while going over this information from Zaj Haman with Shique and Gowen, he elicited an unexpected response from an unexpected place.

Orba and the other two happened upon the dragoon training as they were talking, when the nearby Hou Ran who was checking the dragons' condition spoke out.

"If it's Ravan Dol then I know him," she suddenly spoke.

"He was famous, even in the tribe I used to be in. A man said to be so great that he could make even a violent, wild dragon obey him in less than three days."

Hou Ran was born of the western Mephian nomads. There was likely some Zerdian blood also mixed in. Orba was stricken at how he he hadn't even considered asking Ran until now.

"He's like a male Ran. Which of you is better?"

"Better or worse, I don't know," Ran said singingly. "Only, I'd like to see what those children are like by a man his calibre."

Never dropping her smile, she was in unusually high spirits. At that moment, a dragoon fell sideways off his Tengo. His foot caught onto the stirrup, and Ran broke into a run towards them as the man continued to be dragged along by the dragon. With a stride that made it seem like she was walking on air, she went to the Tengo, whose mouth protruded outwards much like a bird, and touched the Tengo's head, then moving to gently stroke its long neck. In the blink of an eye, the Tengo grew docile and stopped moving. The soldiers approached nervously and pulled out the dragoon's foot.

"That little Ran."

"What's the matter, Gowen?"

"Looks like she's burning with hostility."

"That? It seems to me that she's laughing though," Shique replied, surprised.

"I've finally understood it after being tied together as parent and daughter and living together," Gowen said with a strangely bashful face that didn't suit him. "That's really an abundance of expressions. Or I should be saying that she never knew how to hide her emotions from the start. She only knows how to express them in a way that isn't easy to understand."

"Right..."

"Her eyes are honest. They never lie."

"Rather the doting parent."

Shique said in a voice inaudible to Gowen, causing Orba to struggle to stifle his laugh.

However, Shique completely changed the flow of the conversation, suddenly switching the brunt of it onto Orba.

“By the way, Orba, have you met with Princess Vileena recently?”

“What are you saying? More than recently, I spent breakfast at the table together with her just this morning. You were there too.”

“I’m not asking if you did as the crown prince Gil. I’m asking if you did as the gladiator, Orba.”

“.....”

‘Is that even necessary?’ Orba seemed to ask silently. Strangely, Shique rebuked him in an angry tone.

“You two share a relation where you once took hands and danced, right? Did you ever thank her for the medal you received at the gladiator tournament? But no, you haven’t even gone to greet her since Zaat’s rebellion. You should go see her now. It’s important to occasionally show your face as Orba and give her the impression Orba and Gil aren’t one and the same.”

“Wait!”

Even as Orba tried protesting, Shique called over the page Dinn and told him to bring a change of clothes.

“Come on, go on, go on.” Shique nudged him in the back. “The princess went to the airship platform to watch the airship squadron’s training not long ago. She should still be there. Go on, hurry now.”

In this way, Orba was pressured by Shique and dressed into the guise of a gladiator, still unsatisfied.

It couldn’t be denied that he hadn’t really considered what Shique pointed out. He also hadn’t given his thanks for the medal. If he had to say it, it felt awkward. That medal was the sign of friendship Vileena had given him.

Tch.

A former sword slave and a princess. The relative difference in status between the two went without saying. If a former sword slave continued ignoring a princess’ display of affection, it would foster unneeded suspicion.

Shique you bastard, you planned this from the start, didn’t you.

With his face covered by an iron mask and his torso adorned in leather armour, he headed towards the place serving as the airship platform. It was a location that led several meters higher than the highest parts of the Apta wall.

As Orba walked there, his resentments towards Shique quickly disappeared. The problems surrounding Orba, his difficulties, hadn’t decreased one bit. He gave so little weight to his own personal emotions that they were far off his list of priorities.

The matter with Noue Salzantes also held Orba in unease. It was currently a stopgap measure to buy him time, but it was a fact that he couldn’t keep hold it in place for long.

He didn’t need Gowen to tell him that he knew almost nothing about Noue.

But strangely enough, he held an odd sense of ‘trust’ towards him.

He’s a man who prioritises the welfare of his country first, even if he has to kill his own princess to do so. If he’s a man that resolute, then he should have no problem temporarily setting aside his own emotions.

When Orba found out Noue was trying to take advantage of even the princess' life in the founding festival, he was furious. It was a fury that connected to Orba's own past towards those selfish people in power.

At the same time, that very incident served as the founding basis of his 'trust' towards Noue. Orba hadn't given it a single thought to the fact that these two conflicting emotions had the same cause.

On that note,

He had no definitive proof Noue would really accept his request. But by this point in time he had already set Ax aside and was thinking 'ahead'. To achieve that end, it was imperative he have an open discussion with Noue Salzantes.

Part 3

Vileena Owell sat above a flight of stairs not far off the dock where the ships moored. She watched the silhouettes of the airships revolving around the high sky. The airship unit's practice, that could even be called a hastily prepared one, was held day after day without break.

Oh?

Noticing the imperial guard approaching her, she smiled.

"I haven't seen you lately. Were you in the middle of some secret mission on the prince's orders again?"

"That, isn't it."

Orba, nervous over how he needed to create as many distinct personal differences as possible between himself and the prince, could do nothing but offer a curt response.

"It's not something you can tell me. Pay it no mind."

Vileena said, shifting her eyes back towards the sky. Her feet dangled, swinging back and forth, and her face was vacant.

She feels strangely different.

Her defenceless pose rattled Orba even more. It was his first seeing the princess make such a face. When facing the 'prince', Vileena would more or less shroud herself with an intensity that could cut. And now there wasn't a single trace of that. If he had to say it, he saw in her not a 'princess', but a mere fourteen, fifteen year old girl.

Now seemed like a bad time to bring up the medal, so Orba wordlessly stood beside her and also stared up at the sky.

The wind blew.

"Ah."

A fluttering leaf had tangled in Vileena's hair. Vileena also realizing this, began to reach her hand to the back of her head.

"Pardon."

With that single word, he gently removed the leaf from her hair. The ends held a softness that seemed to melt into his hands, and in spite of that, he could feel the smoothness from the strands. Surprised by the sensation, Orba scolded himself.

I'm acting like a little boy who's never known a woman.

"Thank you."

Again, Vileena smiled innocently. It was one so defenceless, that had she made that face to 'Prince Gil' from the beginning, she would've impressed on Orba, who wasn't well informed about royals and nobles,

that she was a ‘childish princess ignorant of the way of the world’, and completely fooled him.

“...Is there something weighing on your mind?”

“Does it seem that way to you?”

“Um, you seem strangely absentminded. It might be a bit impolite of me, but…”

“Don’t worry. It’s as you say. There have been too many things to think about here, and right now, I find this time where I don’t have to think about any of them strangely comforting. Although it might only be me running away.”

“No, it isn’t.” Orba denied.

He felt he could also understand it. He was also like that, driven into a busyness day after day enough to make his eyes spin. He would forget himself and obsess over his work, but occasionally in that single hour within the day, he turned his eyes away from the things he needed to think about to clear away all the troublesome things crammed in his head. He sometimes found that moment pleasant as if he was floating on clouds.

“You think and think about it, but many of the answers won’t come out. Then it gets to the point where it feels like you hit the dead end of a pathless labyrinth, but you can’t summon yourself to discard it, in fear it might in fact be very important. And when you wake up from a nap refreshed and re-explore the labyrinth, you’re surprised to discover a secret path at an unexpected spot and laugh, thinking ‘Oh, was it really this easy?’”

“I can relate,” Vileena strongly nodded. “However, Orba. This labyrinth is more endless, grave, and deeper than any I’ve encountered. Perhaps you might be able to answer it.”

“Go ahead, please ask away.”

“Then ask I shall. Orba, *who* am I?”

“Hah?”

The masked gladiator unintentionally gave an unrefined response. Vileena looked at him with slightly narrowed eyes.

“I’ve been thinking about it this whole time. Even when Ax Bazgan’s attack happened, the prince foresaw that, all while keeping it from me. The only thing he did was station the imperial guard Shique near me so I could safely get away. I was infuriated that time. In the end, I was another one of the ‘enemy’ the prince needed to deceive, and I was mortified to discover ‘what’ the prince saw me as.”

“.....”

“However,” Vileena took a breath, “I myself am also unable to come to an answer. It’s as if within me, there are a crowd of other mes. Which one is real? Or are they all fake? I don’t understand even that. How am I, who cannot find a hold of my own ‘self’, supposed to make others trust me?”

Nii-san.

Thoughts of his brother passed his mind that moment, of how more than six years ago in their home village, they soaked in the pale moonlight and talked under the starry sky. Vileena lowered her head.

“I’ve been driven by shameful thoughts. I believed I was someone who could be a brave, decisive, able soldier, or even general. Just as my respected grandfather was. And here, I can’t even grasp my own self. Before, you had supposed it a labyrinth, but in my case, just where is the exit in that labyrinth packed with them, or rather, there are too many that I don’t know which to choose from. I also don’t have a destination—
”

“Everyone, is like that.”

“Everyone?”

Orba’s voice had shook a little.

“What is our real self? Isn’t everyone unsure of that answer? Or maybe they don’t know if there even is an answer, as they live their everyday lives. No matter what kind of person they are—royals and nobles, slaves made to take up their sword and kill another person they’ve never met so they can live another day, philosophers, religionists, farmers, merchants—everyone grieves through their own situations; and not knowing what to do with themselves, they dream that there exists a true calling for them. Who are they? Who will they be? Those are as many and endless as the stars that fill the sky, and an inexhaustive worry that persists indefinitely.”

“__”

“I’m afraid to say that doesn’t change for Princess Vileena either, and even a person stained in blood like me.”

“I’m embarrassed.”

“Eh?”

As if he’d been woken from a dream, Orba directed a startled look over at Vileena. Her chin rested on her hands crossed above her lap.

“I’ve been going on thinking as if I was the only one in the middle of distress. But now that you mention it, yes, that might actually be the case. Everyone has their own doubts and feels lost. It’s because those are there that people seek direction and desire a relationship where they can support one another. I feel as if you’re always the one who ends up teaching me things.”

“No, you shouldn’t take my words that seriously. You’re over exaggerating.”

“Are you claiming you just happened to say that?” Vileena raised her eyes and stared his way indignantly. “That can’t possibly be. It’s because, Orba, you’re also lost and hold doubts that you’re saying this. But now my feelings have cleared a little. Everyone’s like this. Yes, grandfather, Theresia, you, and Gil Mephius as well.”

Orba said nothing further back to her. The things he said to the princess were nothing more than a retelling of his brother Roan’s words. However, actually speaking those words now had brought forth unspoken emotions, grief, and a bit of guilt.

At this moment, the airship unit’s flying ended and it prepared for landing. The first and second made a smooth landing, but the third ship hadn’t properly balanced the ether emission levels to match its changing speed and it’s wing grazed the ground surface.

“Pull the left lever and press the pedal!”

Orba raised such a startlingly loud voice that Vileena stood up.

The part of the ship the constituting the wyvern’s feet grinded against the floor and barely finished the landing without crashing.

The princess embarrassedly smiled.

“Keep this a secret from the prince.”

Saying this, she broke into a dash towards the airship without waiting for his reply.

“Noue-sama.”

Roger, commander of the Bronze Knight's second cavalry, ran up to Noue Salzantes along the garden's stone pavings.

"How long do you plan to stay here? We are at a situation where we don't know when our homeland will open hostilities with Ende. If we don't strengthen our defences at the border—"

"I'm aware of that."

Noue stopped his feet and faced to watch the servants pruning the garden trees. Roger mimicked after him.

"Even without Mephius' aid, we shall have Ende and Arion withdraw by our, the knight's, power alone."

"That may be."

Noue also did not underrate his army's power. If they mounted a defensive, they should hold out for some time even against Arion to a certain extent. There were other powers who wouldn't so readily accept Arion's expansion all the way to the centre of the continent, and they had the option of issuing an appeal to the northern coastal nations and forming an allied coalition.

However...

Garbera hadn't yet recovered from the wounds it suffered from the ten year war and Ryucown's rebellion. If possible, he wanted to settle this predicament before Arion came, or more precisely, before Ende advanced its army. For that, Mephius' cooperation was required at all costs. In which case, rather than Guhl Mephius who sought to get closer to Ende, Prince Gil was by far the better negotiating partner. However,

In a way, more so than Guhl Mephius, he is a man I cannot see.

Just as Orba feared, Noue was presently troubled over how far he should trust ‘Gil Mephius’.

While a master of wiles, his actions feel strangely immature when he engages from the front, or rather, it’s impossible not to sense his inexperience. That portion also bears semblance to Ryucown, but strangely enough, other than his burning ideals, I can feel little of anything bordering patriotism.

This is a serious matter, one which hinges Garbera’s survival. There is no way I can entrust that to a man I cannot see. Now then, where shall I prick him from?

Strictly speaking, Orba had caused Noue to become exceedingly cautious. It was in this situation that Orba’s inexperience in interacting with ruling aristocrats served as his weak point.

“Oh?”

Raising his glance up over the gardener’s backs, Noue looked up at the sky. In the direction of the airship platforms to the fortress’ eastern edge, several airships were flying in formation. It was likely a part of training, but what caught Noue’s eye was the rider in front. From here it was no more than a small dot, but there was no mistaking that figure.

“That is…”

After Roger said this, he broke into a smile. ‘Same as always,’ the smile evidently expressed..

The pair headed in the direction of the platforms. As surmised, hopping off one of the returning ships was Vileena Owell. No matter how many times they had seen it, her pilot suit accentuated the curves on her body; it was not something fitting for an exalted lady. Young ones like Roger

tended to turn away in embarrassment. But Noue wasn't one to fuss over attire. Noticing them, Vileena waved her hand and approached them.

"Salzantes-dono. How long do you intend on staying in Apta?"

"There is something of an issue I must straighten out first...yes, I would say either tomorrow or the day after."

"I see. It must be tough."

The princess responded cheerfully, wiping the sweat off her cheeks.

"It seems no matter where you go you will always be fond of the sky, princess."

"Aah. I asked the impossible and borrowed a ship. I only intended to go for a short spree, but the soldiers were so insistent I lend my hand in their teaching that I happily did it."

The Mephian airship pilots all collapsed onto the ground in total exhaustion. Vileena was skilled enough to go head to head against Garbera's world-boasted, finely trained pilots. Keeping up with the princess had likely taken their all.

"The sky is wonderful. Even as the lands are divided into countless countries, the world is tied together by a single sky even as the lands are divided into countless countries."

Oh my.

Noue looked up at the same sky as the princess, but let out a chuckle in his mind.

How sentimental.

"Speaking of which, Noue," Vileena called his name and hushed her voice, "how are things faring with Ende?"

“Honestly, things are looking unfavourable. Our messengers have also been turned away at the gates.”

“What did Prince Gil have to say?”

“That as well was somewhat...”

Noue tried to jest.

“My apologies,” Vileena lowered her eyes. “That person is *always* like that. He shows no interest in the things that concern others, but is surely thinking of something. I’d like you to have faith in that.”

“I would like to. However…”

“Do not fret. Whenever I feel as if I’m about to exceed my patience and decide it’s time to give his bottom a good hard kick, he has always begun to move, as if those feelings have been transmitted to him. And once he does, he moves quickly.”

“Haha.”

Noue was taken with heartwarming thoughts. The reason went without saying. And simultaneously…

She’s already completely taken the stance of Mephius.

Words like ‘my apologies’ and ‘I’d like you to have faith in that’.

However, Noue did understand the princess herself was impatient and frustrated with the prince.

And while being so, she could do naught but speak to Noue, who belonged to ‘another country’, in that way. He had previously seen it as sentimental, but if she had maintained a composed attitude while suppressing those emotions, then it was proof the princess had become an adult.

“If anything, I wouldn’t mind really giving him a kick on his bottom. I’ll drag him by the heels before you and have him talk with you.”

“N-no. There’s no need to have you do such a thing.”

As Noue Salzantes exchanged words with Princess Vileena who at some point decided to take things into her own hands, he felt his heart brighten, strangely enough.

Why not. If he can speak openly, I’ll also lay my feelings bare. It’s a fact that nothing will progress by thinking of where to prick him from the get-go.

Orba was at this time watching Vileena and Noue’s exchange at a distance.

Even if he could not read all of Noue’s changing emotions on his face, he knew.

Tonight, he’ll be coming.

And so, he effortlessly turned his eyes back towards the young girl calling to the pilots dismounting from their ships..

I never got to mention the medal—

That night, as predicted, Orba and Noue talked once more sitting face-to-face in the room at the top of the tower.

Noue no longer hid anything. His request was for Mephius to once forthrightly raise its flags in Garberan lands. After resigning himself to some degree of humiliation, that is.

“For that, allow me to finish all the necessary preparations on Garbera’s end.”

“I look forward to it,” Orba said pulling his chin.

The talks progressed exceptionally fast. Promising to send reinforcements to Garbera was a simple task, but this was on his own accord. He risked incurring the emperor’s anger, more so than Fedom’s.

In preparation, Orba had sent airships on standby as messengers to Solon to spread news of how a group of reinforcements led by Noue Salzantes helped defend Apta. He was expecting this as the perfect justification for his sending reinforcements to Garbera.

If the emperor shows any reluctance towards it, it’ll increasingly fan anti-emperor sentiments. Fedom isn’t one to sit still and watch as this happens. He’ll definitely find a good opportunity and cover for me.

Were that to cripple Mephius or push Mephius into insurrection was of no concern to Orba.

But, before that can take place...

“First, we’ll have to settle Ax Bazgan. All of the soldiers I can mobilise are here. Which stands that as long as he isn’t pinned down, I won’t be able to move for Garbera.”

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t it be hard for him to come in if both Garbera and Mephius send him notice?”

“I wonder about that. I’ve tried investigating the west in my own way. The battles in the west have settled to a calm during this year, but it seems to be beginning to erupt into strife again. And to note, their methods of fighting are completely different from before.”

“That would mean...”

“I don’t know the specific details, but I also have news that a new power has risen in the west. This power has begun to exert its influence and subdued countless cities and nomads. They’ve set up camp in the temple ruins of the former Zer Tauran, and are even calling for an allegiance between the small states.”

Orba was amazed. What he had just heard was also in Zaj Haman’s information, but Noue had in his own clever way devised a network through which to investigate this.

A man I can’t let my guard down against. If I ease up after becoming friends, I feel like he’ll even find out the colour of my morning poop.

Unintentionally, ludicrous thoughts filled his head.

“It’s likely for that reason that Ax is rushed for time. Zer Tauran is a country established by the Bazgan House. Naturally, if the west is to be united again, he believes that one of Bazgan descent is most appropriate to fill that role. And then for a man to appear and name himself king in the temple ruins that symbolises Zer Tauran...If I were Ax, I would need to find a way to display my might to the other city-states.”

“However, if he were to point his sword at the Zerdians as he’s done until now, the new power might join the other towns and eliminate him.”

“Yes.”

“That’s why he aimed for Apta Fortress right when the foolish prince became keeper, huh.”

Orba folded his arms.

“If we were to say it the other way around, we can’t expect much cooperation from the west with it now in disarray. This could even be a chance for me...but I can’t imagine Ax is someone who would give up so half-heartedly.”

“So this would in fact require that we make Ax swear us his allegiance through force. Moreover, when the time comes we let them know both Mephius and Garbera have arranged to deploy reinforcements to aid them against the new threat in the west...”

“Through force...”

Orba raised one of his brows. That would mean a full out war with Taúlia. It would take time to crush them, not to forget that tomorrow or the day after, Noue’s troops would be pulling out.

“Surely you must have already thought of that.”

Noue said testingly. No, he *was* in fact testing Prince Gil. Even for Noue, there were few strategies he could think of that would make Taúlia fall in a matter of days, and they each held their accompanying risks. Would Prince Gil satisfy his expectations? Namely, was this man such that he had something Noue himself didn’t?

Gil Mephius stayed still, his arms folded and him standing. His glance coincidentally fell on the map laid out on the table, seldomly blinking.

Noue would not break be the one to break this silence Orba created.

Now, Oh arrogant, inexperienced, Gil Mephius. Won’t you surprise me? Won’t you teach me the vastness of the world?

Noue was trembling in excitement, waiting, just waiting for Gil to open his mouth.

The night was still long. Before, the soldier’s clamouring voices downstairs could be heard from far away, but now Apta had fallen dead silent. They were likely on strict guard.

“No,”

Gil—Orba shook his head.

“I won’t decide *now*. For the time being, why don’t Noue-dono and I send a notice to Ax with both our signatures. I would appreciate if you could stay in Apta until the response comes.”

“I cannot stay long. I can at best put it off another three days.”

“I don’t mind.”

Gil bluntly replied.

Is he being cautious against me? Or could it be...

As Noue obliged, he felt doubt and disappointment dye his chest in turn.

Chapter 5: Conference

Part 1

Ax Bazgan had received the notice while in Taúlia's Memorial Shrine.

"A request for an audience from Mephius' Prince Gil, you say?"

"Yes."

"Did he send a messenger? I won't receive such a notice!"

Ax glared at the surrounding soldiers and slaves. He had little patience for when things progressed without his involvement.

"No," the soldier delivering the message answered palely, faster than the slaves could tremble in fear at having roused their master's anger. "Amongst the soldiers imprisoned, several have been freed. They carry a message from the prince."

Say that sooner, Ax's blatantly showed on his face as he angrily took the letter from the soldier.

Ax Bazgan. Now aged at forty-one and as the seventeenth head of the Bazgan House, he stubbornly named himself the eighth Zer Tauran king succeeding after Yasch Bazgan, and it went without saying that he was the acting governor general of Taúlia.

With a large build and veins constantly bulging across his wide forehead, his eyes, characteristic of those of mixed Zerdian and Mephian blood, were a metallic grey, and though his eyes held vitality, there was a certain dimness to them.

"A conference in the Gajira Plains, is it. Hmph, not a single mention of our attack. I'm being underestimated here."

Staring at the kneeling soldiers as if he blamed them for their defeat in the first battle, Ax tossed away the letter. Promptly catching it was the the strategist Ravan Dol, who waited behind him. Ax gave a sharp stare at the old man whose eyes followed along the letter's words.

"Your strategy also came to nothing. Looks like you couldn't predict that Garbera would conspire with Mephius to set up a cowardly trap for us. Thanks to that, I've lost soldiers and even had two precious long-range cannons stolen!"

"I believe I warned you it was too early." Not the least bit perturbed by his lord's anger, Ravan continued to scan the letter. "But the one who willed it saying this was a chance that wouldn't come again was you, Lord Ax, despite me saying we should wait at least a week after Garbera withdrew. Because the enemy numbers are clearly so few, we wouldn't know where they'd set ambush in wait. I had warned you over and over that if we didn't carefully scout them out, the possibility we would be caught in a trap was high."

"You must be satisfied, having my honour sullied like this in front of my men."

Ax's mouth bent in irritation. And shortly after, his simmering eyes softened a little.

"...Well? What do you think the Mephian prince's aim is?" he asked in a surreptitious voice.

The old man, whose dark-brown wrinkled body was wrapped over by a single rudimentary cloth, replied,"I highly doubt he has hidden his soldiers to perform a surprise attack. It might be to restrain us or to ascertain the extent of our damages from the defeat by seeing it with his own eyes."

“Hmph, I’ve also considered those. That damned greenhorn who was only able to win thanks to Garbera’s timely aid is getting ahead of himself.”

“Garbera also has to tend to its affairs with Ende, so I suspect they will not stay for much longer. Short of soldiers, Prince Gil should be wanting to temporarily settle everything with his victory. Thinking along these lines, there likely won’t be any reprimands on our attack at the conference. Instead, he should be offering to negotiate with us.”

“Won’t there be any reinforcements from Mephius?"

“They did display movements almost as if they had predicted our attack, but the one to arrive to aid them was the Garberan army. It appears the reports describing the friction between Guhl Mephius and his son can be trusted.”

“Hmmm.”

Ax paced around the shrine’s hall. Step. Step. The irritation dying his face disappeared with the echoing of each footstep. Inside the Historical Memorial Shrine were the remains, documents and treasures accumulated over the Bazgan House generations shrined in a circle: mountains of jewels, models of temples, golden armours, and coffins engraved with pictured hieroglyphs. Even now, they told not only Zer Tauran’s, but also the Bazgan House’s splendour and brief glory. However these were not his ancestors’ bearings but rather mostly items plundered from province storehouses or those they bought back with money.

“Gil that coward...looks like he went crying to Garbera because he knew he had no backing.”

Ax bashed his fan against his palm. That too was an item handed down the Zer Tauran generations and furthermore, an item more important than anything else that could be found in the Memorial Shrine. Encased

in its relatively thick handle was the Dragon's Claw, the one item the Bazgan House brought with them when they fled Zer Illias. Ax held dearly onto this relic that was also known as the sovereign's seal of the magic dynasty, and never allowed it to part from him.

He dreamed to take back the Bazgan House's glory and power within his generation, no matter the cost. Ax drilled his soldiers, bought weapons from the north, and devoted himself to training the dragons everyday. Although many years had been spent repeatedly skirmishing with the other Tauran provinces, he had finally completed preparations to carry out large-scale military operations together with the northern Eimen. Eimen was one of the few comrades that valued the Bazgan House even after Zer Tauran's dissolution and the country Ax's older sister married into.

But half a month earlier, reports coming from Eimen suddenly ceased. According to the rumours that travelled past the desert and grasslands, three provincial states including Eimen had been integrated into an emerging power. The leader of this emerging force named himself a magician who could control the ancient arts, even referring himself by some blasphemic name and using some ridiculous power. But it was a fact his influence was spreading. And this magician had declared he would revive the former Zer Tauran with himself as centre. He had also decreed that, in accordance to the past oath, 'all Zerdians are destined to gather under me'.

That the likes of a magician dares to resurrect a country that rightfully belongs to the Bazgan House!

Ax nearly lost himself in his rage. The other fortress cities were also shaken. Some feared this mysterious power that could overthrow three cities in the blink of an eye, while some burned with ambition that if they owned this power they would be able to revive the Zerdian's country and

leave behind their names amongst the rivalling lords. However, Ax belonged to neither group.

This much was as Noue foresaw. Ax wanted to immediately mobilise his army and destroy this abominable magician himself. However,

“This is a chance that won’t come again, my lord.”

Ravan Dol had whispered to his ears.

Naturally, many states would try to resist this magician. But they would also have doubts whether this was an opponent they could face off alone. This was where the Bazgan House’s legitimate successor, Ax Bazgan, was meant to bring the forces togethers as its central figure through an alliance and rout the magician. Then he would permanently seal the impromptu alliance and declare the birth of a new Zer Tauran.

“However, in order to do that, Lord Ax,” Ravan sternly cautioned him, “you must make a show of power. Lineage may denote your noble origins, but that alone will not make people follow you in these turbulent times. First, you need power. Unwavering power exemplifying the creation of a new Zer Tauran.”

It was for this reason Ax set his sights on Apta. He would first take the fortress through sheer might, and then form alliances with the remaining Zerdian provinces. With their combined might, they could fend off any attack from Mephius while resolving the course of action to best engage the magician’s forces. Or, it was possible the Zerdians that became the magician’s subordinates would, at that time, be incited by the Bazgan House’s strong spirit and rebel against him.

“Certainly, if Garbera and Ende break out into war, it would throw the continent centre into disorder which is favourable for us. It is a time that won’t come again. Still, those Mephian curs. I thought they’d definitely aid Garbera and move their army towards Ende, but they haven’t even

sent a single platoon out from Solon yet. Aren't they being too cautious with us?"

"I wonder. In any case, there's nothing in Apta but Prince Gil's own forces. It's already the third day, but scouts have reported no movements from Solon. Ax-dono, you should agree to the conference. It would do well if we also directly probe the enemy's intentions."

"All right."

It was his occasional display of irritation and anger on his face that Ax demonstrated the great trust he placed in this old man. He made a generous nod.

"Regardless of the conference's outcome, we have to continue preparations for war. Ravan, the new breed of dragons you mentioned, if we use—"

And before he could finish speaking, a piercing scream rang out. Fast as Ax drew the sword from his waist, a single maid came running into the Memorial Shrine.

"My lordship! The princess...Esmena-sama is!"

Hearing the pale maid's frantic cries, Ax stopped in alarm.

"After me!"

Ordering the soldiers, he left the Memorial Shrine and travelled the inner castle walkways with haste. He wrenched his way through two, and then three bronze doors, leading into a garden surrounded by tall walls. A young girl was moving falteringly through a ceilinged passage that connected into the garden. What was bizarre about the scene was how despite there being three maids desperately clinging onto her legs and back, her strides were adamant and the girl continued walking, easily pulling them along as though unaffected.

“Esmena.”

Ax called her name sharply. However Esmena Bazgan did not respond. Her unkempt figure dressed in a thin nightgown unsteadily and insistently advanced forward, her gaze wandering absentmindedly.

“My lord!”

As Ax began running over to his daughter, his soldiers pinned his arms from behind.

“It’s dangerous! That bastard’s foul magic may have caused this. We don’t know what danger—”

“Eei, let go of me! I don’t care! Hold her down by brute force if you have to!”

Receiving this order, the fearless soldiers, adding onto the maids, held down Esmena. This time, being pinned by armoured adult men, even Esmena could not move. Ax had also shaken off the soldiers’ restraints in that interval and went running over to his daughter kneeling down on the pavement.

“Esmena, get a hold of yourself! Esmena!”

“...sama. …..sama”

Her normally faintly rose coloured lips were pale, and she continued speaking in delirium.

“Yes, your father’s[1] right here. Esmena, get a hold—”

“...r, da-sama, gar, da, sama, Garda-sama!”

Roughly alongside his daughter’s raised cries, the soldiers and maids also raised unsettled screams.

Impossible!

Gnashing his teeth, Ax grabbed his daughter with both hands. Her face was in contrast a crimson red, her eyes were narrowed in ecstasy, and her breaths came in ragged gasps. The nineteen year old Esmena, as if to bely her usual innocence, was now plastered in a bewitchingly feminine aroma.

“Garda-sama, Esmena is here. Garda-sama, won’t you come see me?! — Garda-sama!”

“That’s enough!”

In an outburst of anger and alongside some hint of jealousy, Ax slapped his daughter on the cheek. Esmena blinked with a start as if something had been knocked out of her, and placed one hand against her throbbing cheek.

“F-Father? I—Why am I...?”

Returning to her usual self, she stared at her father who gripped her by the shoulders. Ax breathed a deep sigh of relief. Oppositely, unease filled those eyes of hers whose colour mimicked her father’s.

“Could it be...that I...again...? Ahh, th-that’s right. I saw that dream again. Within the deep darkness, a voice from within a dreadful whirlpool layered like folds beckoned me. Countless hands reached out from there and grabbed my shoulders, hair, feet...”

Ahh. His daughter covered her face both hands, crying face down. Ax hugged her.

“Don’t worry. Everything’s all right. It’s just that you have a sensitive heart and were a little disturbed by those weird rumours about Garda’s revival.”

Giving a glance at the maids, he signalled them to escort her all the way to her room.

Even after Esmena had gone, the surroundings remained in tumult for some time. *Tch*. Ax smacked his lips.

“I hope no weird rumour starts up again.”

“Will things really stop at a rumour?”

Saying this was Grand Duke Hergo Tedos, a man who had supported Taúlia after his father and was also currently an existence much like Ax’s right-hand man. His dignified face was now white as a sheet.

“Garda was a man serving as a Ryuujin priest in the former Zer Tauran. I hear that even after our founder Jasch Bazgan passed away, he defended the Zer Taúlia capital to his last. His whereabouts, along with the other claw, have faded...”

“And now, in 200 year’s time, you’re telling me he’s been revived? Ridiculous,” Ax spat out.

He tried to make a show of courage, but as he remembered his daughter’s spellbound face that he had seen close up, he could not suppress that feeling of something freezing over within him.

This makes the third time.

Esmena Bazgan had suddenly slipped out of bed, and like a sleepwalker unsteadily attempted walk out the castle while calling Garda’s name. The first time, he’d heard she tried to seduce the door guards stopping her.

Ax was furious and was even about to cut their heads off right that instant to prevent the news from leaking. But just as he was going to do so, he was stopped by Ravan Dol.

To his horror, this type of incident appeared to have been occurring throughout the western lands. Young maidens of high stature all similarly muttered Garda's name and wandered the castle night and streets with entranced faces like pilgrims trying to make their way to the former Zer Illias temple.

This was hard to believe, but nothing except magic could elicit such eccentric behaviour from his own daughter.

"Ancient magician or not,"

Ax's face grew sterner and he ran his hand against the fan hanging on his waist.

"There's nothing steel can't cut. Stay firm, Hergo. I'd like to believe there's no soldier so weak-willed he'd get disturbed by gossip, but there's always that one in a thousand. Superiors must make a show of their valour."

"Besides, our current enemy is Mephius. The Mephian imperials may name themselves descendants of the Dragon God, but they don't actually expect any idiot to believe that, do they?" Ax scoffed.

He was a man who lived through the feuding west. Even if he harboured fears within, Ax was no fool that would so easily let it come on his face.

Part 2

The conference took place in the Gajira Plains, distanced equally between Apta and Taúlia. It was across the Yunos River and seven kilometres west through mountainous terrain within Taúlia dominion. Ax thoroughly investigated the area in case some uncalled-for schemes from the enemy awaited him and set up tent.

There was still a bit of time until the promised noon. The sky was cloudy, and lukewarm winds blew aimlessly. It was unpleasant weather.

Ax led a mere twelve soldiers here. Other than that, there was only two airships he had prepared to to survey from air. It was to show of Ax's boldness, but there was a crowd in his surroundings.

"Seems the lord of Taúlia is having a meeting with Mephius' prince!"

"I wonder what kind of person the Mephius successor is."

They were the people living in the nearby villages, and desperately trying to get a closer look across the fence the soldiers had set up.

In the western world that prospered the collapse of countless powers whereby(and) the prospering collapse, the Bazgan House's history was all the more long and its people's lives also protected. In the other regions, it wasn't rare for rulers to change several times in the span of a year, and each time, the governing body would be thrown into disarray and the people wheezing in hardships, to only have the soldiers and mercenaries turn burglar and assault them frequently. Many things happened that disrupted peaceful living.

"Should we drive them away?"

A soldier from within the tent asked as he pushed the opening to look outside.

"Leave it, leave it."

Ax shook his head as he wiped the sweat off his neck. It was humid.

"Our Taúlian people are dogged. Even if you drive them away, they'll immediately conceal themselves and watch us. Did you know? When there's a struggle nearby, there's even a bunch that bring boxed lunches to watch it," Ax said straightly.

And though his people's backbone was clear as day to him, that same notice did not reach so far as to his own blood relations' action-taking.

In a place separate from where the citizens gathered, were people viewing the conference spot from far away. A man leading his horse and a hooded women closely cuddling up to him. Their appearances were suspicious, so a soldier had called them to a stop and asked to remove the hood, but then they were immediately driven away.

"I wonder if he was ordered to by father."

"I gave him plenty of threats. That guy knows what will happen if he angers me."

"Well," the girl spoke in a laughing voice that rang out like a bell, "you sure are scary, Bouwen. Even if you are reputed as the gentle boy that loves birds and flowers."

"P-Please stop it, princess. Look, we don't know who might be watching."

The one with his face reddening was the adopted son of Grand Duke Hergo, Bouwen Tedos. He was still young, some would even say child-faced, but he was also a general commanding a part of Taúlia's army; those eyes that occasionally kept watch of the surroundings were stern.

And the woman referred to as 'princess' was Ax's daughter, Esmena Bazgan. Unlike her father whose forehead was surrounded by incessant wrinkles, her features were extremely gentle. Her big eyes glistened with curiosity and her luscious lips naturally broke into a smile.

"Aah, outside feels great! As I thought, I can't go being holed up in my room. It feels like my body and mind are rotting. That's why I had that repulsive dream."

Bouwen returned a smile, though in fact, he was looking at his childhood friend three years younger than him with heartrended thoughts.

That she can say a cloudy day like this, with such ill-blowing winds, feels great...

It should be considered extremely depressing weather. The princess, raised under Ax's fundamentally overprotective bearing, had been confined in her room since the aforementioned disturbance with the nightmare, and additionally guarded by some several dozens of soldiers; a state of house arrest. Surveillance so strict that taking even a single step out the door warranted her father's permission, and that might cause her to raise the white flag before the various nightmares could.

Although, even with assigning that many guards, it's a fact things will end up like before. It's abnormal.

All the soldiers he questioned on guard duty that evening heard the princess' weeping. And their memories from thereon had been completely wiped. When they were discovered, everyone—those outside the room, those in the corridors, those on the roof were all fast asleep.

Everyone. There was not in the slightest way this was simple negligence.

Magic that affected a covered distance was from more than 200 years ago. Why would that manifest now—

Bouwen ground his teeth, when the people rose into a stir. A single air carrier appeared as a dot under the ashen sky. It drew closer before their eyes. It appeared to be a cruiser-class ship. Bouwen had collected his share of information on Apta. Since the prince had not used any ships when he departed from Solon, that would make it the sole carrier available in Apta.

From it, small airships launched, carrying its passengers to the ground.

"Ho, so that's…"

Bouwen muttered. Esmena also watched them intensely. Descending were five people. It went without saying the leading youth was Mephius' first prince, Gil. He was lightly armed, but as per custom, he placed the sword hanging on his waist onto the ground.

He walked up halfway towards the tent. Ax exited and exchanged words of greeting.

"I've heard stories, but he's surprisingly young."

Bouwen glared at the young successor of his longtime enemy Mephius with piercing eyes. These were turbulent times such that it wasn't rare for men to adorn their first campaign at the age of thirteen or fourteen, but seventeen was a bit too young to be attending a meeting as a country's representative.

That is...a person from a different country.

Esmena murmured in an inaudible whisper. Although there had been merchants from other countries that came to Taúlia, the number Esmena could meet were severely limited. Especially with those from their historically contested enemy, the Mephians, although she had heard many stories of them.

Well, I wasn't really expecting them to be any different from us.

Seeing them with her own eyes, she nodded convinced. There was no way they would have horns or tails, and she didn't see them as that savage. Mephius' prince was certainly young, but she could also see all his retainers valiantly confront her fearsome father. As proof of that, her father tried to invite them into the tent, but the prince declined and pointed to the surrounding ground.

After her father made the usual sour face, he ordered the soldiers from inside the tent to set up a long table and chairs. The prince had likely

proposed to hold the meeting outside. Before long, her father was seated across from him.

What could they be talking about?

As far as Princess Esmena was concerned, even this trivial matter was like a great adventure to her. It was a heart-pounding excitement.

Above all, the prince of their archenemy. Esmena unwittingly felt herself drawn towards this youth who carried features from a land unbeknownst to her. That might have been an omen of the future.

“Now then, O’ young Mephian prince,”

Ax Bazgan initiated.

“Our ancestors have long since thousands, and tens of thousands of years past, explored our homeworld and settled into these lands, handing them onto us. We have succeeded their frontier spirit, but their decennial oath sworn in the lands of the Seirin Valley was ultimately never fulfilled in ten years time.”

“So long as there is merit, I shall not seek conflict.”

“That’s right,” Ax shook his head. “‘These vast lands and boons are before us. Why do we fight and divide them?’ —Those are famous lines used even in plays, but in the end, humans are beings who inflate to match their insatiable desires. In the midst of the battle against the former inhabitants, the Ryuujin Tribe, the one to turn his gun on his own brothers was none other than one of the five sages who established the decennial oath, an old female scientist.”

“You’re well informed.”

“And in this way, we now shed our blood competing with one another. I won’t say anything clever, like how this is truly absurd. However, if a futile battle can be avoided, I believe there’s nothing better than to do so. I’ll say this outright, Prince Gil. Withdraw from Apta.”

“That’s a really interesting proposal.”

Prince Gil grinned and looked back into Ax’s eyes.

This damn greenhorn’s getting ahead of himself.

Of course, Ax did not think once he would obediently accept the proposal. He was observing Orba's behavior taking a high-handed attitude, regardless of his character.

“Once I obtain Apta, the west’s power balance will undergo a drastic upheaval. Within two years, no, in under a single year, I will unite it. Moreover prince, I’ve prepared to form an alliance with your Mephius.”

“My thoughts of avoiding a battle are the same, Lord Ax. All the more reason why there should be no need to put things off. We should join oaths of friendship *right here, right now*.”

“And who would believe that the prince and I joined hands and pledged here? You aren’t the emperor yet. When a man of no credence hopes to get something, he must provide some definitive compensation in return. That would be Apta. It is to our mutual benefit that—”

“I don’t have the least intention of leaving Apta.” Gil’s expression remained unchanged. “Bazgan-dono, you’re saying selfish things. It’s you who desperately wants the alliance with Mephius so you can focus on the west.”

“What?”

“But you’ve been in conflict with Mephius for a long time. As far as the Bazgan family is concerned, it has been stirring into its men that Mephius is their longtime enemy. That you would just join hands with that enemy without gaining anything is bound to brand you a coward and traitor. That’s why you first tried taking Mephius’ fortress through armed might.”

Tch. I won’t be able to strike a deal with this one.

Saying it so outrightly like this would only cut off both sides’ path of retreat. Ax irritatedly flexed his hands over his lap.

Or could it be he even hopes we have a frontal collision? No—if that was the case, then he wouldn’t have gone out of his way to request an audience like this.

Gil had his own weakness. Ax was of course aware of this, but he was hesitant if he should actually say it. That would really be the final straw in cutting off his final path of retreat.

“Prince Gil, aren’t you being a bit discourteous? It was you who proposed this meeting. As a matter of fact, I expect you to return the men you took prisoner using your cowardly traps as compensation for responding your invitation.”

“Do you still not understand, Lord Bazgan?”

“What is it that I don’t understand?”

“The one who triumphed in battle was us, Mephius. And the ones who will continue to triumph shall also be us. However, I’ve been thinking of having Taúlia function as a buffer between us and the west. That’s why I didn’t storm you by force. It should allow you, Lord Ax, to concentrate on unifying the west without worry of being attacked from behind. It is *we* who are offering you our hands.”

“Ho—”

Ax felt a violent rage surge within. Ax had never engaged with a man who irritated him this badly. He felt as if his long-standing Bazgan House's authority had been trampled under his feet. So he too, finally unleashed those words he had locked within himself.

"I see. Triumph, huh. I'll concede that. It was you that cornered my beloved vassal Natokk and his men, who fight so heroically. But all of that was because you had Garbera's reinforcements! They cannot stay in Apta forever. Now, when the time comes, O heroic Gil, can your forces alone withstand Taúlia's onslaught?"

"That is…"

Even Gil's spirit had dampened from that, and he averted his gaze. A feeling of relief washed over Ax as he saw this, but it appeared the warning had been *too* effective, and he suddenly raised his head.

"That was a declaration of attack, huh. You heartlessly refused our hand, and insist on shedding blood in battle to the bitter end, is it? Very well. I, Gil Mephius, shall neither run nor hide. Even without Garbera's troops, do you believe I will be defeated by a swindler like you?"

"What?!"

While Ax's roar continued to resound in the surroundings, Orba kicked himself up from his chair, turned around, and hurling orders to his soldiers, once more rose into the sky. Completely dumbfounded by his actions, Ax Bazgan did not make a move during that time and watched as the airship was taken into the cruiser disappearing into the ashen sky.

"How dare he," Ax roared in a fit of anger as he beat the fan into his palm. "A mere kid dares to sully my honour? Ravan! Ravan Dol, are you there?!"

“I’m here,” the old strategist replied, sticking his head out from within the tent’s curtain to confirm the situation. He approached Bazgan, his eyes turned away from the commotionally astir people.

“It’s as I’ve heard from the rumours. He’s a fool. Words won’t reach him! Ready the preparations. Once you’ve confirmed Garbera has left the fortress this time, attack them immediately. We’re doing it over!”

“Please wait, my lord.”

In contrast to the lord who almost seemed to have steam blowing from his ears, Ravan Dol was as cool as could be.”

“It is a trap.”

“A trap?”

“As far as rumours go, that prince is neither foolish nor without discretion. He likely has some plan. Provoking us into attacking is a part of it. Well, if he was truly discerning, he would also be able to tell bad acting when he sees it.”

“Are you trying to make fun of me, or are you giving me advice? Which is it?” Ax demanded, clenching his teeth. “But still, a trap you say? I don’t believe it. That an ignorant greenhorn would draw up such a plan. Then as I suspected, it means the Garberan reinforcements are coming.”

“I’ve set watch over the roads connecting to Apta, yet there are no signs of it. That in itself is stranger than strange. Hmm...my lord, why don’t we take up his invitation?”

“What are you saying? You’re the one who called it a trap.”

“There is a big difference between charging the enemy without knowing anything and moving your forces aware that it is a trap. Even if the enemy forces may be lurking somewhere, purposely provoking us can only mean one thing. They are waiting for us. Understanding even that much allows us to proceed a number of ways.”

Ax watched as Ravan Dol stroked his chin saying this with ample confidence. “Fine,” he said, and reached out to grab the fan in his waist. He flicked the stem of the golden-stringed fan against his lap.

“No matter what, I’ll see to it that he gets on his knees begging and never sees a peaceful sleep ever again. This time, I’m heading out personally!”

He declared with a face worthy of a man who had charged through many battlefields.

On the other end, some distance away, Esmena Bazgan’s shoulders were trembling.

“I wonder if it will turn into a war.”

“It will.” Bouwen’s young face flushed red. “The lord is making that sort of face. This could become the decisive battle with our longtime enemy Mephius.”

Esmena kept silent. She was uneasy and fearful but somewhere else the figure of the prince who had come from another land she’d just seen had, like a heavy boulder, impressed itself and submerged deep into her heart.

Garda...

It dealt a blow to Esmena Bazgan so heavy it was enough to dispel the darkness she’d seen in the midst her dreams. To phrase it more commonly, at that time Esmena experienced something akin to love at first sight.

Part 3

The prince’s proclamation of war against Taúlia had circulated inside Apta Fortress for half a day.

The place became a riot—or so one would think, but a large number calmly received this piece of news. Things were more or less due to turn out this way, and with the prince's quick wit now revealed, they figured the prince must have worked something out.

However,

Vileena thought,

That is all because everyone believes reinforcements will be coming from the Solon capital.

In her opinion, that probability was exceedingly grim. She had tried indirectly asking the imperial guards but couldn't get any sure proof. In a week from now, Oubary Bilan, who will have finished suppressing the slave's insurrection, was set to make his way to Apta, but by then it would be too late.

Further into the next morning, the forces Noue Salzantes led had at long last pulled out to return to their own country.

"Is there any message you'd like to give to his majesty or your mother?"

Just before he left, Noue had gone to Vileena to offer his farewells. Vileena thought over it a little, but shook her head.

"I had written them a letter before. That should be enough. If I get too unrelenting, I'll surely get scolded."

While smiling, Noue never lost the meek expression in his eyes. They unspokenly enquired, *Is it fine for you to stay here like this?* And all the more reason because she understood this that Vileena pretended not to notice it.

"More importantly, I trust father and mother in your hands."

“I understand.”

That Noue was pulling back meant the outbreak of war with Ende was drawing near. Like previously, Vileena stood and saw Noue off, and once that ended, she strolled the fortress interior accompanied by Theresia and caught her target.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“W-What’s the meaning of what?”

Darting his eyes was the Imperial Guard, Shique.

“It may be presumptuous for a woman to speak matters of war, but the way things are now the chances of victory are slim. I’m sure Prince Gil is thinking of something, but would you happen to have any knowing of this?”

“Aah, no, the likes of me is not something he’d reveal his innermost thoughts to…”

“Stop lying,” Vileena declared assertingly. “Whenever that person sets something into motion, the few of you will unquestionably carry the brunt of the strategy. The ones he trusts most are you.”

The moment Vileena mentioned the word trust, she felt a slightly bitter emotion stir within her chest.

I’m amazed she’s noticed.

Theresia silently stood behind Vileena not showing any change.

I had thought something was weird when the one she decided to catch was Shique.

At a glance, he was a gladiator used to handling women, but before Princess Vileena, he was the one to stand most at attention. Vileena

undoubtedly grasped this intuitively. He was awkwardly respectful towards herself, and couldn't give her the cold shoulder.

That Vileena-sama could resort to this kind of device is proof she has become a splendid 'woman'. Well, I can't say there's much appeal in taking it this far. It's much more becoming of Vileena-sama for her to do this unknowingly.

Sure enough, Shique was cornered speechless. Seeing Shique shift his sights in search of help, Theresia took a step forward.

"My, princess. You are troubling Sir Shique. Why don't you let him off at that?"

Because she was prevented from cracking down on Shique, Vileena's bounded destination was all but one.

Vileena stood still shortly, as she delved into that feeling of having finally getting closer to her purpose.

These past few days, or rather since she had come to Mephius, she had been conflicted with problems that ate away into her. Should she move as the Garberan princess, or the fiancee of Mephius' crown prince?

Simply, what was it that she should do?

These all too burdensome worries felt more than she could handle, but after speaking with the Imperial Guard, Orba, that load somewhat lightened. And it was then that she had a revelation.

"At times like these Vileena,"

Suddenly, she could hear her grandfather's voice in her ears. She had a revelation.

I remember now!

Her grandfather had said that ‘people stop being the self they were when they were born’. When she had the conversation with Orba, those contents had begun to resurface, but Vileena could now vividly recall it by word.

Occasionally there are times when a person is created from shouldering a position. Even people that no one holds expectations from, when given the appropriate post, cheer up and fulfill them.

Fulfilling them means carrying the necessary responsibility that comes with it.

“That might be similar to acting someone’s life in a play.”

Her grandfather Jeorg Owell smiled at the young Vileena as she listened obediently.

“They wear a mask that is the ‘post’, and do their best to perform the most suitable personality. They might laugh at you thinking you’re doing a monkey show, especially in the beginning. They might call you incompetent. No matter what the mask, given the necessary time to play it out, they will grow used to wearing it. Before they know it, their surroundings will also grow used to it. The more they get used to it, the more naturally they and others will perceive it. They’ll grow more and more into your role. By then, the mask will have become a part of the person’s face.”

“Then what will become of the flesh on that person’s face?”

That was when she was 11 or 12—if she remembered right, that was her age at the time. Towards his granddaughter who asked him impertinently, Jeorg laughed with a “Hm?”

“Will the flesh on the face disappear? Will it be replaced with the mask?”

“There are those where it does disappear,” Jeorg said without any signs of deceit. “There are also those who can skillfully wear both their skin and flesh, conflicted over which is the real them. Take for example, Vileena.”

“Yes?”

“I am the previous Garberan king.”

“Yes.”

“And I’m also Ainn’s father, as well as your grandfather.”

“Yes.”

“Which is the real me?”

“Both of them are real.”

“That’s right.” Jeorg made a wide smile and placed his hands over Vileena’s shoulders. “Having you say that both are real to me makes me really happy. But even I wasn’t born wearing the mask of ‘king’. At the beginning, I was also confused by this mask I was half-forced into putting on. There were also relatives who pointed fingers behind me saying it didn’t suit me. I could even feel the flesh on my skin slowly disappear bit by bit, and that also terrified me.”

“Yes.”

Vileena also made a terrified face and felt her father’s cheek with her finger.

“As for whether I can skillfully use both the flesh and mask, I do not know. No, at some point, the mask started becoming my flesh. Should I say that they’ve fused together to become one, or that one of them was

torn apart without me knowing, I still do not know at present. Say, Vileena."

"Yes, grandfather."

"You're also my granddaughter, Ainn's daughter, and Garbera's princess. You might be someone's best friend, and someone's enemy. Before long, you'll become someone's lover, someone's wife, and someone's mother. Each time they add onto your face, you mustn't turn away. It's fine to think, it's fine to be lost, but you mustn't never run."

Having her father say this to her with a stern face, Vileena also stiffly nodded.

"If there ever comes a time when you no longer know which is your real face, as you anguish, anguish, and grieve. At that time, Vileena, look into the mirror and do *this*."

Saying this is Vileena, her grandfather pulled his finger over one eye and stuck his tongue out.

"Once you do this, the mask will naturally come undone and you'll feel yourself seeing the real you."

Vileena had been surprised for a moment, but she immediately broke into a giggle and wrapped her arms around her grandfather's neck and hugged him.

"Princess?"

Theresia called out worriedly to the princess who had stopped walking.

"A mask..."

Vileena had since been pondering, that wasn't it her halfway position her half-hearted self? That as well, was one such mask. As long as one desired it, they could remove it at any time. And yet, at some point, her face had been usurped by the mask.

The only thing remaining then, was her resolve. Would she bear her fangs as Garbera's princess playing the poisonous snake sent into Mephius, or would she resolve to bury her bones as a Mephian princess.

"I, Vileena, cannot decide on either." Speaking her honest thoughts, Vileena faced her unseen grandfather and spoke. "However, everything is clear to me. There is one thing I *want* to do right now."

"Princess? Princess, is something the matter?"

Theresia had finally felt uneasy that something might have happened, when Vileena quickly began walking off.

Just as Theresia thought she was retreating to her bedroom, Vileena stopped in front of a large dresser and took a deep breath in.

"Blehhhh."

Pulling down one eyelid, she stuck out her tongue as far as she could. Theresia, who had finally caught up to her mistress, in the face of this scene nearly toppled over. Vileena nodded.

"Yup."

"What do you mean, *yup*?"

"Okay, I understand."

Next was to commence something similar to a surprise attack. She was abiding by her grandfather's maxim, that speed is most prized in battle.

Prince Gil was at the fortress' first floor in the western study. Vileena suddenly appearing had startled him, but he regained his composure.

"So you came to scold me again?"

He asked with a bitter smile.

"Am I making such a scary face?"

"Ah, you aren't. Last time's was more...should I say that it's because you're being discourteous."

"I've done some learning. Should I vent my emotions on the prince, I'll only be effortlessly driven away. Anyone opposing the prince has ended up like that."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"From your appearance, I assume you have something in mind. I take it you can win against Ax Bazgan?"

Her perfectly open question had Gil renewing his expression. Returning the book in his hand back to the shelf, he answered back.

"We're at the disadvantage if the enemy prolongs the war. I don't know how much reinforcements to hope for after all. So I provoked them."

"You seemed to have talked to Noue this morning about something."

"Yeah."

Although Gil Mephius—Orba was a bit hesitant, he had experienced firsthand the worries and unease Vileena harboured from the time he came in contact with her as the masked gladiator Orba. He understood the reason why she, while afflicted with those worries, had come here. So he honestly answered her.

“I’ll make Ax ally us within three days. After that, I’ll have our forces hurry to Garberan territory, as promised.”

“Prince…”

For a moment, Vileena felt the breath squeezed out of her and then she looked at the prince.

“I’m repaying the debt to Noue. And also, I can’t bear the thought of being threatened by a gun and taken hostage by you.”

“But then won’t you earn your father’s displeasure if you do this on your own?”

“I was originally the incompetent prince. I’m already prepared for my share of scolding.”

At some point in time, Theresia had offered a single bow behind Vileena and excused herself. Vileena, not realising this, stepped up closer to the prince.

“It looks like I keep piling onto the questions, but still, making Ax swear allegiance in under three days is somewhat challenging. Do you have a plan?”

“I do,” the prince replied straightforwardly.

Vileena’s gaze further met his.

“Then, can I in any way help?” Vileena asked.

Orba couldn’t hide the surprise on his face.

“The princess will? Don’t you hold any doubts on my plan?”

Now you bring that up? her face said. Vileena smiled thinly.

“During Ryucown’s subjugation and also Zaat Quark’s rebellion, I knew nothing. No, even if I had known, I who held doubts towards the prince, would have refused to take your hand.”

“...”

And everytime after when I came to find out about it, I’d regret having you treat me as a child.

As she reflected on this, her mind was painfully calm.

But now I realize the reason I was treated as a kid was because I really, didn’t know anything. The prince is always wavering, worrying, and handing down his decisions where I don’t know it. What vexes me isn’t that he kept it secret from me—yes, it must have been because I couldn’t be of help to him.

That’s why right now, I want to help the prince. That’s how I feel. There’s a part that also wants to do it for Mephius and Garbera, but more than anything, those are my clearspoken feelings.

But what Vileena actually spoke out, was this:

“This time, it’s a matter also concerning Garbera. Just this time, I’ll entrust everything to you and offer my services.”

She said, chest out, chin up, exerting her excellence. Orba couldn’t stop that wry smile from forming.

“So as I was saying, if I were to help you, feel free to tell me to do anything. This time, I won’t disobey or scold you. I’ll move as you say.”

She’s really a changed princess.

This too, Orba had felt at this late hour. Thus, as she would when she tries poking her head in quarrels, Princess Vileena's cheeks blushed and her eyes shone vividly.

And then those eyes began to quickly waver.

"As I thought, it's no good."

"No, hold on."

She's making a face like a child that's picked up a new toy.

Orba quickly erased the smile that seemed to form around the corners of his lips. The princess as well, had not said this for play. In fact, he could see her commendable determination and resolution surrounding her.

"Fine. I'll also have you take a part in the battle plan."

"Will you really?!" Vileena's face lit up in the bat of an eye. Then what is it I should do? Use an airship to scout the enemy? Or maybe disturb them? Or should I act as decoy and distract…"

"Okay, Okay, hold your horses."

Orba held his hand up to restrain Vileena, whose excitement was getting ahead of her.

"Then tomorrow morning, I'll have the princess depart from Apta. Take ten imperial guards with you. Then head for Birac…Whoa, hold it, you said you wouldn't scold or disobey me. This is a crucial part of the plan. Won't you take my word for that, Princess Vileena?"

Translator's Notes and References

1. □ Ax believes Esmena is trying to call out otou-sama, which means father.

Chapter 6: Capture Apta Fortress

Part 1

Vileena Owell had boarded Apta's only cruiser and departed from the fortress city—.

That piece of news brought mixed feelings to Ax Bazgan. They were currently smack in the middle of preparations to deploy.

There were soldiers in armour everywhere as medium-sized and large-sized dragons sluggishly emerged one after the other from the dragon stables.

"Is he having the Garberan princess take shelter in a safe place? Which means he's finally decided Apta as the place where we'll hold the deciding battle."

"No, it's a clever move."

Ravan Dol appeared. Walking around with his favourite potato stuffed in his cheeks might as well have reduced the famed strategist's dignity to rubbish, but he had until recently been in command of moving the dragons out from their cages. No matter how ferocious the dragon, they were equivalent to a tamed dog once subjected to Ravan's wiles, which he was well known for.

"What is?"

"Consequent to him suddenly sending their only carrier away from Apta, we will worry over where that carrier is headed. It might load itself full of soldiers and return, or maybe conceal itself in our advance route."

"Let's say he's getting reinforcements. In that case, things will be fine as long as we swiftly attack and crush them before the ship returns. With a distance of a few hours at most, they don't have enough soldiers to

exceed ours, right? And if it's to ambush our troops, that isn't too much for us to concern ourselves with. Your strategy, in the first place, was to attack from multiple fronts. As long as one of the routes we use breaks through and captures the centre, it is our victory."

"Mmhm." With a most fitting nod, Ravan plopped a potato into his mouth. "Or perhaps, it might be to incite us quicken our pace in this way. That he's done this to provoke us must mean he's confident in Apta's defense, and also in finishing up the battle shortly."

"And we're supposed to be intimidated by that? We set up a strategy knowing we allowed ourselves to be provoked. Don't get cold feet now. Now, call together all the commanding officers. We're going to review our strategy one last time!"

Prince Gil was most likely assuming they were going to make a direct attack on Apta. Since Taulia held the upper hand in terms of might, it was only natural that they would employ blitzkrieg tactics. So as far as Gil was concerned, luring the enemy in deep was the premise on which he worked his plans.

Ravan Dol had therefore proposed attacking from multiple directions, in a way that facilitated a multi-faceted attack at different intervals. Even supposing the enemy had been running their mouth and now lay in wait, he did not believe Apta currently had the forces to hold off a second or third attack.

Of course, they would also suffer some damage, but it was still much better than concentrating their forces as their enemy hoped. Ravan certainly did not underestimate the Mephians, namely Gil Mephius.

"Oooh. Can we use those?"

Ax, discovering a new species amongst the dragons being carried out from the cages, revelled in delight. “Yes,” Ravan Dol responded in concert with a rare chuckle.

Three metres long with rust-coloured scales, the most notable aspect of this medium-sized dragon was the horn growing from the centre of its head. The one-horned dragon Yunion. A selectively bred variant of the Baians. Its four limbs had grown fat and short, but they were far more agile than their appearance suggested, and its scales repelled swords and spears even up close.

Ravan had, with the Baians as the basis, crossed many species of dragons, and by some miraculous probability, arrived at this usable breed after several generations of painstaking efforts raising them from hatchlings. He prided in their fierce capabilities, but more than that, they were intelligent and obedient to humans.

Mephius’ main force were in the Baians. They certainly grew quickly and there was also no problem with their battle prowess, but the number of eggs they laid in a single setting were few and they had tempers; they could only be handled by a select few. The Yunions could be said to account for this weakness.

“They will be a great addition. —All right! We move at sunset. Let that Mephian brat sit arrogantly in his chair believing he’s got us caught in his trap.”

He put on his helmet, a heedlessly large horn attached, and affixed his slightly curved long sword to his belt.

Straddled onto a Tengo, Ax Bazgan raised the six-metre dragon lance fixed on the saddle and spurred his men.

“It’s time to set off. Men, you are soldiers who have conquered demons. They may try to swing their *dull* blades and fire their pea-sized bullets, but remember! Those frail Mephian men can’t even lift so much as a finger against our cattle. We shall illuminate the magnificent glory of the Bazgan House greater than the sun, and show them the very meaning of blinding! Now, words won’t be needed from hereon. Push forward!”

On the other end, the Aptan inhabitants had fully taken shelter. There were those who relied on their relatives and moved to another town, and those who carried food to the cellars and readied to spend several days there, and then there were the remaining majority who followed the soldiers’ instructions.

All their faces showed unease. If Apta became a battleground, the houses and fields would get damaged, regardless of victory or defeat. To make matters worse, the Garberan army had left the fortress, and even Princess Vileena departed. Not so much as a single soldier had come in response to their request for reinforcements. In everyone’s eyes, the chances of victory were slim.

Orba, on that day, established the fortress hall as headquarters and sat at its heart.

Many of the men around were busily moving about, but Orba alone sat umoving. His arms were folded as he stared at the map opened before him, and he would occasionally look up and gaze into empty space.

There, Pashir came along. He was sprucely dressed in the set of clothes Orba had previously given him.

“Is everything in position?”

“Yes.”

He wore a grim face, but it was his usual one, devoid of tension and anxiety. Pashir's independent infantry unit was assigned to the southern gate.

"..."

"If there's something you want to say, then say it. You have the status of a commander. If you, the commander, continue to carry unease, it will affect your troops' morale."

"What are you saying this point in time?" Pashir's nose creased, "As if there's even a single person who isn't uneasy over this war. If there's a far-sighted person amongst the enemy soldiers surely marching here now, and he could see over 'here', he would be up for a surprise. Because, there's no one here at all!"

Orba's lips swerved up, and with a small snigger, offered no further reply. This time was different from his usual indulgences. Even he, if he had to admit it, was nervous. This was on a different scale from simply commanding his Imperial Guards and undergoing covert operations.

He was constantly shadowed by an unease that there was something he might have been mistaken about. Would it be better if he made a change to that plan? Would it be better to assign those men some other location? Did they have enough bullets? Were the guns and cannons in perfect condition? What about about the dragons?

If he had to speak his real mind, he would rather get off his seat and go around the fortress interior than play commander in a place like this. The things he wanted to confirm through his own eyes were innumerable. But he had already done this time and time again leading up to this day. So Orba was going to stay here, even if it meant suppressing his own emotions. Just as he had spoken of to Pashir, any negative emotions a

general carried within him—worry, apprehension, fear, dismay—could not be allowed to show.

A leader's strength soaks in steadily, like soil does from the ground. But it only takes an instant for his weakness to show. Like a fuse lit on fire.

That was something Orba was instinctively familiar with.

"More importantly, you really meant it, right?" Pashir brought a different topic to the conversation. "That if we reap merits in battle, you'll free all of us from the status of slave."

"Of course. It's for that reason that they desperately fight. They've also seen how you became the infantry commander with their own eyes."

"I see." Swallowing his various emotions, Pashir suddenly assumed attention. "Then if you'll excuse me, I'll return to my station. I'll also relay the words you said just now."

"Ah, Pashir, except..."

"Hah?"

Pashir's feet stopped right as he began to leave. And at Orba's following words, he made an indescribably complex expression.

"Your life alone won't be set free. You've already become the infantry's commanding officer, and my subordinate. I don't have any intention of letting you go."

It was that time when the sun began to set.

They've come.

In the headquarters, Orba stood up from his seat.

On the Yunos River border, Ax's army's flag waved. The timing was as Orba had predicted, but their positioning was strange.

The river's chasm lay between them; they were on the other side. As the forest's shade blended into the dark sky, they began to align two long-range cannons.

Naturally, Orba ordered the northern battery bordering the river to aim across the valley and fire. Twice, thrice the cannons roared. The enemy quickly pulled the cannons back and retreated towards the forest, but it was not a complete retreat. The tall pole bearing Taulia's flag stayed up, firm and unmoving.

Are they aiming for a protracted battle?

He considered this, but what Ax Bazgan was afraid of most were Mephius' reinforcements. He should have known full well that, due to the original difference in both countries' strength, if he overlooked this chance the fortress would no longer be for the taking.

The sun soon set. Because the enemy had not lit a single fire, the cannons could not take aim. Nonetheless, Orba ordered them to repeat fire at fixed intervals to hold the enemy in place.

Each second passed itched him in impatience. Orba's plan was, as Ravan Dol had foreseen, to lure them in and then surround them. If the enemy would not move, then they also would not move. Orba took countless deep breaths. His body's pains had considerably receded. Now, it was not beyond him to take a sword and plunge into the enemy ranks. However, this time he had no intention of shouldering such a role. Nay, he mustn't.

"Prince."

Gowen came running.

“They are also coming from the south. They seem to be advancing along the same route as last time and are making sure to scrupulously examine the path ahead this time, so it appears they will take some more time.”

“What are their numbers?”

“According to the scout’s report, roughly three hundred. Judging from their speed, they likely have no cannons.”

He split the army, huh.

The force across the river was likely meant to divert their cannon fire. There was no other reason why Ax would purposely expose his valuable long-range cannons.

“Harden the gates. Shoot them from the watchtowers and steeples. Have Pashir and the others remain on standby.”

The cannons stationed on the south-eastern tip fired at the area in front of the southern gates. The Taulian soldiers came running through the dirt exploding in the field. A skirmish line. The few-membered forces each displayed orderly movements.

Retreat followed advance. Advance followed retreat. Pashir leaned against the parapets, watching the battle taking place below him.

Oh!

He ducked. A cannon nearby the gate exploded. Stone and wooden debris rained down his back, accompanied by the smell of gunpowder. The Mephian assumption that they ‘had no cannons’ was wrong. It wasn’t a mistake to assume this from their rate of advance, but the Taulian army had two of their newly bred Yunions pulling each of the cannons.

Even as the Mephians tried to shoot it down, the Yunions would pull back to be replaced by gunners and archers pushing forward. Their aptitude in freely commanding the dragons could possibly be said to be greater than Mephius'.

"Prince, shall I sortie the airships?"

Neil Thompson, the commander of the airship squadron, exerted his determination and as he did so his red face grew even redder. Even as the impatience inside him grew, Orba answered,

"All right, form two three-unit groups and head out! Your destination is across the chasm from Apta on the other side of the river. Your role is only to restrain them. Don't go too deep! All you have to do is earn the northern battery time before it can be used."

"Yes sir!"

With a vigorous kick off the hall flooring, Neil darted off.

That's the spirit.

As the footsteps resounded in his ears, Orba retook his arms-folded posture.

They were already long aware the Mephian side had prepared a trap in wait. With that in mind, they utilised tactics to offset that aim. If they were to entrust themselves to numbers and storm in, things would have advanced as Orba predicted, but they were slowly whittling away at his forces and were already prepared to sustain a certain degree of damage.

His body ached. The colour of his blood right now was most likely black. It seethed black, coursing through his body just under his skin. He felt it molding itself into another one of himself.

That other him was eagerly clamouring to take that sword from his waist and go running into the battlefield right this instant. ‘It doesn’t suit you to sit still in a place like this. Now, take that sword and gun and go towards the place of killing. Evade the enemy’s gunfire, climb over your men’s corpses, and soak your sword in the enemy’s blood. Isn’t that exactly your specialty?’—

Tch.

Orba grit his teeth painfully and ordered an imperial guard squad leader to call Shique.

Pointing to a spot on the map, he relayed his instructions

“Take command of the gunners and exit the side gate on the east. Use the shortcut through the ridge to flank their rear. Have one ship act as a decoy. Perform volley fire on them in that opening.”

And at the same time, he hurried a messenger to Pashir.

“Have the Black Armoured Division act as reinforcements. Once Shique and the rest succeed in their surprise attack, launch your attack.”

Shique left with twenty gunners. Just as they were about to leave the urban districts, the enemy cannon fired and broke the wall’s upper tip. They crouched and left running out from the fortress walls, all while the firing of each round sent chills throughout their entire bodies.

The urban areas held a number of secret exitways, and after going through one of these, they followed along the route Orba had given them. A single airship crossed up over the gate. Enemy fire shifted towards it.

“Fire!” Shique ordered.

A barrage of gunshots, loud enough to drown out all other sounds, rang out in succession. The enemy soldiers were caught defenceless, but owing to their spread out formation, it didn't throw them much into confusion and caused little damage. Next, the gates opened and Pashir's troops sprung out armed with their swords.

Pashir started with the nearby approaching soldiers, slicing through one of their torsos, then stopping a overhead axe swing with his sword, he ran it straight through the Zerdian's head. And without a second's delay, he turned his body and cut off the arm together with the spear of the soldier who launched at him behind.

The foot men following behind, starting with Miguel Tes, also let loose in a frenzy.

They were men who before were already prepared to face execution. Even with a gun pointed at the tips of their nose, even if the enemy's sword they failed to parry struck a blow to their shoulders, even if an arrow pierced their toe, they drove forward unfaltering.

In the meanwhile, Shique provided cover fire for the infantry while trying to corner the enemy's cannon. However, the scattered Taulian platoon laid their bodies low and bathed him in a shower of bullets. One soldier beside Shique about to load a bullet took one to the face.

The battle in front of the main south gate was, however, altogether moving in Mephius' favour. The Black Armoured Division, seeing this as the proper timing to push out joined the melee fray and the Taulians were forced into a gradual retreat.

Thus, the Mephians began concentrating their forces to the front.

A soldier came rushing into headquarters carrying bad news for Orba.

“N-New enemy forces approaching from the west!!”

“West?” Orba sat up. “Their air carrier huh. So they still had reserves. Tch, turn the cannons—”

“It’s not only air carriers! There are also enemy dragoons. They’re attempting to ford the river on their dragons!”

Part 2

Ax Bazgan was in this moment aboard Taulia’s only cruiser-class ship taking command. The pair of sails released on the ship’s top and bottom to balance the ship in the air received the night winds and spread plenty. Armaments were equipped on the ship’s bow, port, and starboard one apiece.

Under the ship, Ravan Dol personally took the dragoon unit and advanced east against the Yunos River’s current. Nearby Ravan, a single airship messenger was seen tagging behind.

The enemy would never imagine that they would cross directly against the river. Yunos’ vehement current was nothing to fear for dragons. Only, they risked subjecting themselves to enemy fire because there were no spots to take cover, but it was for this purpose Ravan had split the forces.

“Apta has few soldiers to start with. There is no way they could account us crossing the river, so there is a good chance they haven’t stationed soldiers there. They won’t be able to immediately respond to our attack.”

Ax grinned from the sky. Even better, the cannons they lined across the chasm began full-blown firing. And with the cruiser’s appearance, preventing the dragoons’ advance would becoming more and more difficult.

“Begin cover fire! You don’t have to aim, but do it enough that they can’t ignore us!”

Get too close, and they risked entering enemy range. The air carrier acting as a mobile battery from the skies would serve more than enough.

The Apta fortress surroundings lit red and then smoked white as the cannon’s roars sounded. Both side’s bombardments were as Ax instructed, having little effect at all, but that opening allowed the dragoons straddled on their Sozos and Gorus to gradually cross the river.

They used the transport route for goods ferried through the river, climbing the gentled hill and approaching Apta. When just as they prepared to slash their claws and swing their tails to tear down the fortress walls,

“Enemy airships have started their attacks on the dragoons! ” A soldier confirming the battle’s progress with binoculars shouted. Ax curved his lips into a sardonic smile.

“Ha! Too slow, too slow, too slow! Bloody Mephians, the trap you tried to set up for us has backfired now, hasn’t it? Everything’s been forestalled, forestalled, forestalled.”

Gil seemed to be confident in the trap he laid within the fortress, but in trying to draw him in he did absolutely nothing to halt his advance. Gil was too lax in allowing him to place his men however he wished.

“Send the second division to the south gates! Don’t forget to stay alert on the air. The enemy air carrier may show up.”

On Ax’s issued command, the infantry and dragoons riding their small-sized dragons that carefully hid themselves in the southern forest entered the battle. The Mephian soldiers who had begun shifting towards the tide of victory, turned to panic at the sight.

After putting up a pathetic attempt at resistance, they immediately shut themselves behind the closed gates.

All the cannons at Taulia’s disposal had been used up to distract the enemy so there were none remaining; but in its place slowly appeared an enormous shadow. Next to that shadow was Bouwen, entrusted over command of the second division. He raised his sword and shouted.

“All right men! The engineers will support the tanks while advancing forward. Gunners will stay in position and provide cover fire. Soldiers, this

is the moment we've been waiting for! Draw your swords and wait for my signal!"

While the first division clashed swords with the enemy, the tank they had finished assembling beforehand was sent out. (Alt: they sent out the tank they had finished assembling beforehand) The appearance of the multi-wheeled tank advancing forward, grinding the dirt up as it did, was just like a mechanized dragon furnished with long arms and three heads. The arms were ballistas, and the heads were towers that carried several gunners, designed to be ladders to lean against the fortress walls. In its front was a pointed horn, designed to pierce the bulky gates and walls, it emitted an eerie shine.

Originally, it was supposed to be pulled by dragons, but because this time the majority had been focused onto the force attacking from the west, the engineers walked bent over laying out rails, pushing the tank through them.

Boom. The horn rammed into the gates the first time, sending ripples down Bouwen's stomache. The defending enemy towers left and right of the gates rained down bullets, and likewise shots fired from above their own towers.

Roughly the same time the southern gates were being smashed to pieces, the dragons breached the western walls and flooded into Apta's city districts. Those frightening roars and tremoring footsteps surely struck immense fear into the hearts of the townsmen hiding under their cellars.

"All right!"

Ax shouted joyously.

With this, our victory's decided.

The enemy's plan was probably to lure the enemy into their bosom, but now that they had allowed Ax and his men to break all the way into their belly, that trap was going to have little effect. Their line of vision had been reduced to only being able to confirm the enemy's forces with their own eyes. Having broken into the urban districts, they could send detached dragoon units to subdue the batteries, meaning any firepower that threatened the air carrier was no more. This extensive starry sky existed only for Ax.

"Move the ship forward. I'm also going down. I'll catch Gil Mephius by the neck with my bare hands."

Ax ordered the ship's advance as he lovingly caressed the fan on his waist.

And without experiencing any major obstacles, Ax drew closer to Aptan fortress walls, and the multitude of towers as well as the houses' rooftops came under his view. As the plan was to lure the enemy into Apta alone, the figures of the populace fleeing was nowhere to be seen. They were most likely taking shelter.

"Mmh. This might end without bringing much resentment."

Ax nodded, satisfied. Apta was practically already his territory. Ending this without having to set homes ablaze and involving the populace into the conflict; it was safe to say there were no results better than this.

For this reason, Ax never ordered his men to set fire.

The dragons heavily plunged forward the stone-paved streets. They closed in on the fortress walls from the other end of the city. Arrows and bullets were fired from the tower battlements, but the three soldiers each on the plain scaffolds tied onto the Sozos' back also responded in suit. As a single Sozos was pierced in the eye and collapsed, the remaining dragons swarmed the watchtower, smashing it to pieces.

The air carrier came to a stop above a different tower connecting to the castle. A ladder unrolled down the ship with armed soldiers climbing off. Ax Bazgan was within one of the airships in the cruiser.

“Have the cruiser remain on alert in the sky. We still don’t know the whereabouts of the carrier that left Apta. Although I doubt it can do much even if it comes back.”

After giving this order to the ship’s captain, Ax personally descended down to the tower’s roof.

“My lord!” A soldier came running up the stairs and kneeled. “We have sightings of Prince Gil. He’s been reported fleeing the first floor with several men who appear to be his Imperial Guards.”

“Oh ho? That he didn’t run off away from the castle is praiseworthy. Ravan!”

Around one of the corridors overseeing the garden, he spotted the strategist perched on a dragon and called out to him. In high spirits he asked,

“What do you suppose I should do with the prince? Kill him, or maybe capture him alive?”

“If possible, capturing him alive would be ideal,” Ravan answered sternly. “Having an all-out resistance against Mephius would be bothersome. Taking him hostage and agreeing to a temporary ceasefire in exchange for him is best.”

“Hmph. Until then, I’ll shower him in plenty of affection as he serves under me ‘til he can’t go on anymore.”

Ax hummed, as he was led by his soldiers down the stairs.

Ravan Dol surveyed the dusty surroundings reeking on gunpowder with squinty eyes.

Now, what odds does that prince have to provoke us?

In the end, not a single one of Gil's supposedly laid traps had set off. One of their advance routes had been thwarted, but making their way into the fortress so easily had been in a way, unexpected.

I highly doubt he actually plans to hole himself in the fortress and fight while being sieged.

And then, feeling the presence of an air carrier taking off above him, he looked up.

A shadow blocking the view of the starlight approached his way. Their Taulian air carrier began to intercept it. This was likely the cruiser that had left Apta in order to let the princess escape. No doubt it was their plan to land behind them while the Taulian soldiers were concentrated on attacking the fortress, and pincer them. However they had already missed their chance. At this stage where the castle had already fallen, there was little they could do, and in fact, it immediately turned tail from where it came. The Taulian carrier begain to pursue the cruiser—

No, wait.

His long years of experience and characteristic senses flashed at him jolting those nerves that grew lax with the foretelling of victory into waking.

"The enemy ship's retreat happened too fast. It seems to be luring our cruiser. Messenger!"

"Yes, sir!"

The answer came by the dragon's foot. The messenger airship, in order to conserve ether, stayed on the ground when the troops weren't moving.

"Head for our ship. Tell them not to chase the enemy cruiser too far."

"Understood!"

The messenger immediately started the engine and flew off to the sky together with his airship, disappearing into the black of the night.

"Sir Ravan. What about us?"

"Stay on the lookout. If that carrier was meant to lure us, another ship might be coming."

"If more troops come, do you suppose they'll charge us with dragons?"

"We need not be afraid of Mephian trained dragons. In fact, have you come across even a single dragon while here? They likely ran away in this confusion—"

The instant after he said this, Ravan's body was rocked vehemently. It wasn't only Ravan, but the soldiers, the towers, the Sozos—all of Apta was taken by a severe tremor.

"What in blazes?!" Ravan cried.

His sight was directed towards the sky once more. A huge shadow loomed over the night sky, as if engulfing the fortress. Ravan's predictions were right on its mark. However, the envoy raining down destruction from that huge shadow did so only on a single point that, in a certain sense was the most crucial of all, and went against all his expectations.

The large tremor had, of course, also swept under Ax who had gone down to the first level.

“What on blazes?!”

As he cried the same words as the strategist, a second, then a third tremor came. The ceiling and walls creaked and dust fell on them. His men scattered left and right. In the confusion Ax often found himself nearly crashing shoulders with his men.

“A-An earthquake? At this timing...damn it to hell.“

At that point, a soldier went on his knees in front of the staggering Ax.

“We’re under enemy attack!”

“Enemy? Where is the enemy?”

“T-The sky—A large dragonstone ship’s appeared and is bombarding Apta!”

“*Apta?*”

In spite of their current dilemma, Ax struggled to grasp the meaning of those words for an instant.

“Apta, you say? Absurd! What kind of idiot would attack his own fort—”

A fourth tremor came. He came to a start at the creaking(jarring) sounds of the beams supporting the ceiling. The majority of the soldiers were already scrambling out of the fortress even without Ax having to give the order.

Don’t run! Ax had tried to shout, but along with the fourth tremor a portion of the ceiling behind them collapsed, swallowing several soldiers in it.

“All right—stay in the air until we get the signal. Spread the sails and continue the bombardment.”

Further up on the sky above Apta, 150 metres overhead, the large air carrier Dhum spread its sails. This ship, as per tradition crowned the name of Dragon God Mephius’ subordinate dragon, was Prince Gil’s flagship.

The commanding young captain was one of the men Gil had left in Birac. He was a winged dragon officer and also the youngest born of a noble family.

Inside the bridge, Garbera’s princess Vileena Owell was also present. Her head held high, she leaned proper against a chair prepared for her while surveying Apta’s ongoing bombardment.

The day before, Vileena had been commanded by Prince Gil to depart Apta, but it was not so that she could take shelter. While successfully making it seem that way to their enemies, she embarked for an intermediary airship base and boarded the Dhum which had been moved there.

The one transporting the Dhum all the way there was Birac’s merchant, Zaj Hamann. He camouflaged the ship so that it would not be recognised by the enemy and had it fly together with a group of other merchant ships he had prepared.

“Dhum is our last trump card,” Orba affirmed when explaining the strategy to Vileena. “An ace hidden for a time when the number of moves who can make are limited amongst those already limited moves. We’re talking about a ship this large. When the enemy sees it, they’ll go off thinking the rear guard has come all on their own. The enemy’s

greatest strength is in their numbers. It comes to be that the thing they have to fear most will be reinforcements from Mephius."

It was certainly a valid strategy, she believed. It also seemed capable of driving Ax Bazgan off. However, this would only work once. In the end they still had few soldiers. Knowing this, Taulia was more than likely to come here again with an even more overbearing force . *Then again, to think...*

Even as she kept her face expressionless, the surprise did not disappear from her eyes. She would have never imagined he would bomb Apta fortress itself. Of course, he would lead the townsmen into the forest in preparation for this.

The thunderous roars continued beneath in succession and smoke gushed upwards shrouding the flying pieces of stone like a monster made of clouds.

"Even I hadn't considered destroying the fortress from the very beginning. It was just a card I kept in reserve. But to remove Taulia's threat as soon as possible, there's already nothing else but this," Gil Mephius had frankly told her.

"I saw Ax Bazgan using my own eyes and heard him with my own ears. He will come out to the battlefield. Even if he doesn't, he's a man full of pride. He'll come with a large army to attack my impudent self. *That* is our aim. We will be sacrificing the fortress. If the enemy doesn't come with a large army, then there's no meaning to it."

Thinking about it now, that was just about the first time he met her face to face and spoke his real mind.

"Sending you to Birac is also a move to make them think I'm hoping for a decisive showdown. ……Saying it like this, you might get mad at me but even if you choose you stay in Birac..."

“If you already know that I will object, then do not mention it,” Vileena sweetly answered. “I am sure it will only turn out as you imagine it.”

“R-Right.”

Gil scratched the tip of his nose. That sight of the adolescent boy did not seem like it belonged to the same bold commander daring to bomb his own fortress.

Right now, holes were being torn into the upper walls of the fortress and its ruins collapsing into the lower balconies down to the garden. The ramparts blasted to rubble and several towers were hollowed and disfigured with fire spewing from their openings.

The enemy soldiers who infiltrated into the stronghold would unmistakably be thrown into confusion from this bombing. Under this complete reversal in position, it seemed only a matter of time until Ax was drawn outside.

Ravan Dol was taken aback by the unfolding scene and stared up at the sky eyes wide opened, not even noticing his mounted dragon acting out of control or how he was about to be thrown of his scaffolding.

However, that lasted only a moment. The veteran staff officer vanished the surprise from his eyes, replacing them with a composed glare, and he quickly began comprehending the situation.

So destroying their cannons has backfired on us.

They possessed no arsenal to fire down that ship. Even he had not supposed the enemy was brave enough to bomb their own fort. The ongoing explosions summoned unrest amongst the soldiers and the dragons. “There boy, there boy,” Ravan raised his voice as loud as he could pulling the reins connected to the scaffold.

It was for times like these that he made the dragoons carry around a powdered medicine he'd mixed. A sniff in the dragon's nose and it would repress their excitement. However, it also induced a state of muscle paralysis, thus rendering the dragons unusable.

"Men! Don't falter!"

The strategist Ravan Dol excellently calmed his mounted dragon. "Look!" he said pointing to the sky.

Just now, the carrier receiving Ravan's direction was returning back. The enemy ship that first appeared was a decoy as he had expected. The returning Taulian cruiser immediately began fire and quickly approached Dhum. At the same time, the rain of bombardments came to a stop.

"Before the enemy cruiser returns, secure the medium and large dragons' retreat! The quick-footed dragoons will group with our lord and bring him back even forcefully if you have to!"

"But Sir Ravan. We've come this far."

"We were *let* to come this far, you imbecile! Now, do as I say!!"

The imbecile is me.

As he endured a disgrace enough to make him want to slit his own throat, he saw off the Tengos launching themselves into a dash.

But even then, his observant eye that had accumulated on years of experience grasped the situation cooly.

There was also the possibility they could be caught in a pincer attack from the returning cruiser, but...

No airships are coming out from the enemy carriers. They don't have the forces to spare. On the other hand, our carrier does have airships. If we

use those to chase away the enemy flagship, we should still afford plenty of room for retreat.

To add, the enemy had smashed their own castle. If in exchange they did not also suffer a heavy blow, then the scales would not even out. In other words, if they could keep their damage to a minimum, then it could be called their win.

We'll return back to Taulia, immediately reorganize our forces and come back to attack this half-wrecked fortress.

Ravan Dol began preparing his next move as he looked up at the air battle between the carriers that began to ensue.

Part 3

At this time, Orba lurked under the Lord's Chamber.

In order to draw Ax out, he had momentary shown himself around an area of food cellars and jailhouses, and used a secret passage together with his men to temporarily hide themselves underground.

The commencement of the bombing was arranged to be when the enemy chasing Prince Gil Mephius rushed the Lord's Chamber.

The strategy splendidly struck home. The enemy's stirred voices and flustered cries carried all the way to the cellar.

All right.

Signaling his men with his eyes, they made their way through the underground passage.

It led beneath the dungeons opening to a hole drilled onto the cliffside. Below the cliff flowed the Yunos River across Apta's western edge. This was originally the place transported goods were carried through but the

first Aptan lord had concealed the entrance, claiming the spot convenient as a hiding spot or a place to escape to in an emergency. Having turned into a temporary place of refuge, the cave was reinforced with iron. The would withstand the bombing for the time being. Orba ordered Pashir and the infantry to lay low here while he, leading his personal imperial guards, boarded onto a small boat floating on the river's surface.

It was night, and furthermore in the underground; the waters beneath the dock splashed up and down dark as darkness itself. Orba stood front and held his lantern up.

After continuing this path and exiting below the cliff, the plan was to strike at the enemies from the flank who climbed using the current transportation route . If the enemy were to happen to already be initiating their retreat, then Orba would just circle ahead of them and lie in ambush. As they rowed the oars against the waters however, the tremors from above stopped.

It's too soon.

Orba, who had traveled down to the cliff's western bank, observed a ship next to the Dhum. Cannonfire opened across the skies. Dhum's bombardment had stopped, too preocuppied with returning fire. A look of impatience came across his face after realising the decoy strategy had been seen through.

"Hurry!"

He broke into a run on the path carved onto the cliff.

There was merit in making a sacrifice of the fortress precisely if it could deal a great damage to the enemy, but that the bombing stopped meant a chance Ax Bazgan could get away. And then with a half-destroyed fortress, they wouldn't be able to defend a third attack from Taulia. Just as Ravan Dol depicted in his mind.

As he hurried his men, Orba looked up repeatedly at the sky. Vileena was most likely inside that flagship. He had told her it didn't matter even if she decided to wait at Birac, but this was Vileena he was talking to. There was no way she would accept shutting herself in a safe location with the way things were.

He was unsettled.

But at the same time.

If Vileena's there...

He somehow found his one ray of hope there.

The inside of Dhum's bridge had also risen into a clamour on report of the enemy carrier's approach.

It had only been a few minutes since they had begun their bombing. The enemy air carrier that should have been lured away by their cruiser frigate had quickly made a full turn and coming back.

"Have they seen through our trap?"

The young captain said with a pale face. While he had graduated from the Winged Dragon Officer School, this was his first time actually taking command in the skies. As for the cruiser frigate prepared as a decoy, it was tasked under the commandeer of Krau, a slave now serving Gil by recommendation of Zaj Haman.

Krau was a profusely experienced pilot, but flying a ship in the battlefield was likely also her first. It was unlikely she would be able to chase the enemy and immediately rally with them now right after the enemy had taken an action running against their expectations.

“T-The enemy has deployed airships!”

An officer viewing through binoculars cried loudly. The captain leaned forward.

“Their numbers?”

“A group of four, wait, five ships are flying our way.”

And at the same time, the enemy carrier opened fire. A second, then third shell came flying and grazing past the Dhum before their eyes.

They possessed no airship force. They had barely scraped a single unit for transmission with the ground, but the rest were turned to Apta’s defenses. As a result, the enemy airships were unobstructed and easily took position above the Dhum. They began to be bombed.

“Uwahh.”

The sky turned red for an instant and then the bridge jerked like it had been grabbed at the neck by a giant hand.

Naturally Dhum’s turrets also returned fire, but the members on board including the captain all were lacking in experience. Each time the ship slanted, cries were raised and many tumbled onto the floor.

Vileena Owell also frantically clung to her chair. Again the sky dyed white. This time was from enemy carrier fire.

“Give *that* to me.”

Even as her body was being assaulted by the violent tremors, Vileena reached out her hand and snatched the pair of binoculars from the officer.

The enemy airships drew a curve over them dropping bombs and each time causing the Doom's hull to break into a tremble. And this time, Vileena was thrown off her seat and flung hard onto her back.

"At this rate, we'll be sunk!"

One soldier cried out, no longer able to stand it.

"C-Captain, let's retreat. If even the Dhum gets done in, that means we'll lose our means to bring the prince back to Solon."

Said another, sensibly urging the captain to retreat. The captain was also about to call quits. Vileena bit into her lower lip. Stopping their bombardment here would obstruct the prince's plan.

Raising her voice over the others, Vileena asked the captain,

"There should be a single airship within our ship, shouldn't there?"

"T-There is, but..."

In the eyes of the hesitating captain frantically deciding if they should retreat or not, he had no time to deal with the princess. He did not send a gaze her way but still,

"Let me use that. I will head for the cruiser and lead it back here."

Being told this, he finally stopped and turned to look Vileena's way. The foreign princess strode determinedly out of the bridge not waiting for any answer. "It's dangerous!" he shouted out, but Vileena ignored him and disappeared from sight.

The captain clicked his tongue and then turned back towards the front.

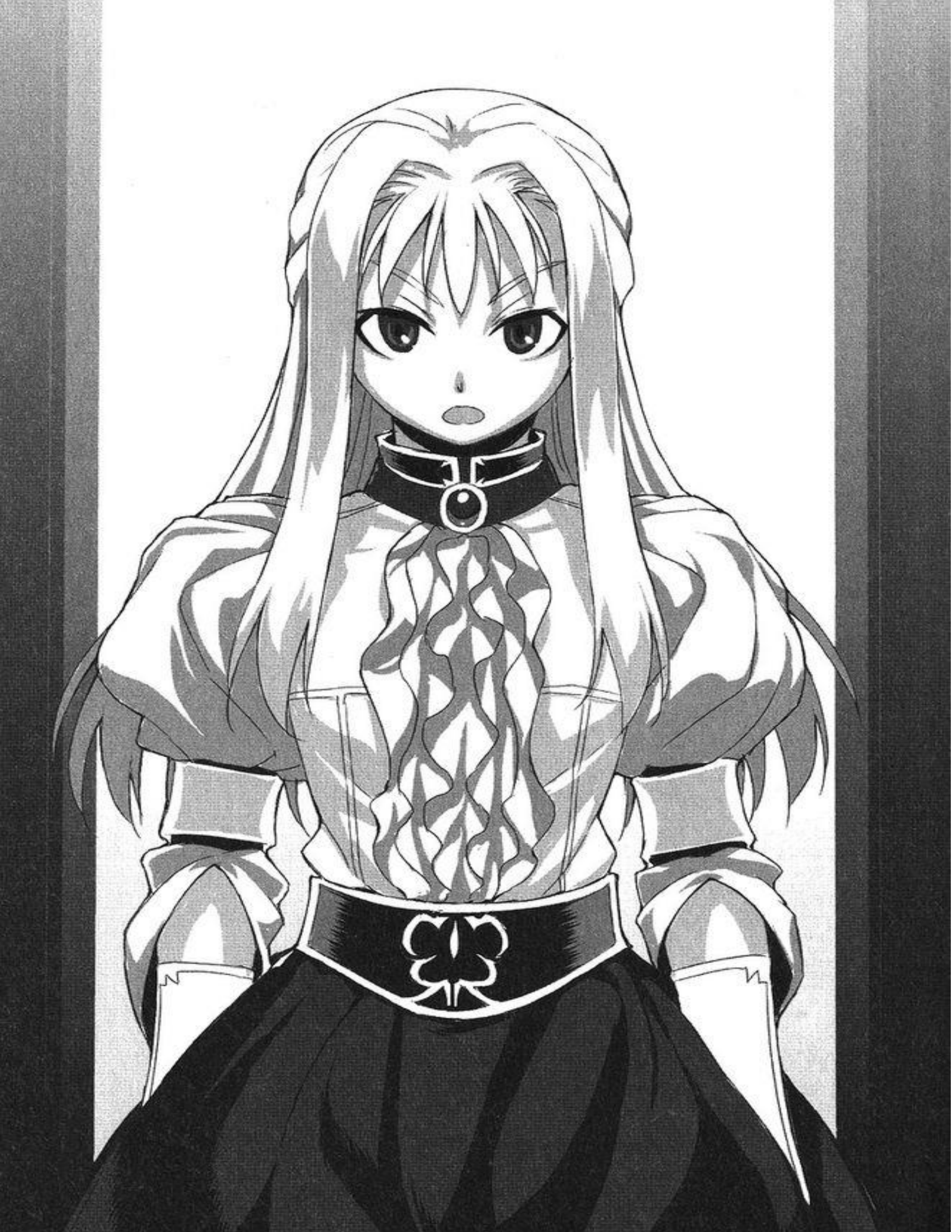
The armaments placed on Dhum's upper deck roared in hopes that it might drive the airship fleet away, but it was producing no results. Even in the captain's eyes it was a haphazard method of firing that was not

likely to land on any of the enemy ships. And though he tried to inspire his men through the voice pipe countlessly, the airships swerved their bodies and disappeared into the sky.

A fourth tremor visited them. Their ship largely slanted to the left. The flagship seemed to be about flipped upright at this rate. However, though swept by many screams, the captain narrowly held his feet to the ground.

“N-No, this can’t go on.”

Coming to the conclusion that they were already driven this far, he screamed with a force that hurled spit from his mouth.



“Staying here will only get us shot down. Retreat! Retreat!!”

He ordered the helmsman. The entirely disordered men inside seeking direction jumped at the captain’s decision to flee without hesitation.

The hull began turning. Just as they were about to surrender the fortress sky to enemy hands, a clear voice called the evacuation to a stop.

“Please wait.”

“If we do not hold our ground here, we will not be able to smoke out Ax. The enemy is also restless. But if our crucial Dhum flees, it may let the enemy know our forces are inferior and allow them to occupy the fortress, leaving the prince trapped in the midst of the enemy.”

“Princess!” The captain opened his mouth widely. “Weren’t you heading for the airship?”

“I entrusted the task to a soldier on standby in the warship. I will remain here.”

As soon as she said this, Vileena rested her back against her seat once more.

The captain took the sudden change of heart and mistook it as the princess not having the courage to step out.

Vileena continued further,

“From the enemy airships’ size and shape, the number of bomb shells they can carry are two. They will have no choice but to continually resupply after bombing. Hence, we will endure until our cruiser returns back.”

“Absurd!”

“It is no such thing as absurd,” Vileena defended, mimicking Theresia’s words.

What does a damn princess know!?

His anger that should have been pointed towards the enemy had suddenly seemingly shifted towards the princess.

“Dhum is a large heavy cruiser. We are protected by the iron plating placed over the dragonstone. We are shaking like this because of, in all due respect, insufficient maneuvering ability that can keep us steady in the air. This should be the same as a strong wind brushing against the Dhum. That is why we will not be sunk from this degree of bombing. We need only focus on bombing the enemy cruiser. In a headlong confrontation with their ship, our firepower is superior. Look. As proof, the enemy cruiser is maintaining a fixed distance. They are doing nothing more than persistently threatening us through bombing. If we do not want to stay under any further bombardment...”

Vileena purposely cut her words short. Her gaze faced straight at the captain. The otherwise looked the same way.

“We should be shortening our distance and bombing them...”

As role of command, the captain succeeded those words mouthing them in amazement. It was not that the plan was absurd, but perhaps because he had spoken them personally, it now seemed to him the optimal approach.

He gulped down. He now clearly understood the reason Vileena presumably remained here. It wasn’t that she didn’t have to courage to fly out alone. She instead chose to sit firmly down to spur on the faint-hearted soldiers. Yes, that was the stance of a ‘leader’.

He started again at Vileena from the side. The fourteen year old princess sat straight up with her hands crossed above her skirt only looking forward, even as her face paled.

Tch.

After mumbling something sounding much like a swear,

“I’m withdrawing the order for retreat. Maintain bombing while firing from the ports. Messengers, relay to the stations!”

He sent the commands through the voice pipe. He had made up his mind.

At this time, by a stroke of fortune, a shot from their defending cannon shot down a ship. The soldiers seeing the enemy ship burst into a ball of flames and falling down burst into cheers. In an instant the atmosphere within the bridge changed.

Vileena nodded once and then kept her back straightened without a single tremor.

When she left the bridge, she had wanted to fly out into the skies as it were, but just as she was about to, the soldiers’ low morale weighed on her mind.

There was no meaning to calling the cruiser back if the Dhum did not hold its position in the air. She resolved herself and gave directions to the pilot on standby in the hangar to dispatch in place of her.

Grandfather said this once, ’Whether soldiers display unwavering loyalty before their death place or turn into cowards that flee only from the sight of the enemy all depends on their leader.’

Another tremor hit. Vileena entrenched herself.

Vileena did not fear being caught in the middle of a rain of bullets when she would be the one piloting the plane. But here where she entrusted herself to a pair of wings steered by another, she experienced a never before felt fear of the skies.

Her hands and legs seemed to want to break into trembles. An unease that the bridge might be enveloped in flames and engulf her plagued her. Or perhaps, they might lose control of their flight and be sent crashing into Apta fortress.

Her hands and feet seemed to break into trembles. Still, she tightly ground her teeth and roused herself.

A human revered with noble blood was expected a demeanor of fitting capacity. Vileena at this moment donned the mask of her pictured ‘commander’.

The enemy airship continued on with its fire—.

“Tch! What’s taking so long?!”

Ravan Dol smacked his tongue as his face pointed upwards. Mephius’ flagship did not move even as it being bombed from several directions as if saying it would not forfeit the skies no matter the cost. The report that the soldiers were inexperienced seemed to have been wrong.

Either way, he didn’t have much choice but to hurry the arrangements for retreat, but—

At that moment, a beast’s growl roared to the flank of the soldiers heading out to act as Ax’s cover.

“What?!”

Glistening scales scorched the colour of the flames spewing from Apta fortress flew into Ravan Dol's view. At the same time, the dragon cavalry together with their Tengo began flopping over sideways. The dragons' cries shook Ravan's ears.

It was an ambush. Ravan could hardly believe the sight before him. Seven Baians were being excellently controlled through the reins of the soldiers riding them and overwhelming their dragons. That cleverness was something, but what alarmed Ravan most above all was how the dragons laid dormant in a part of the fortress until now.

Our dragons have charged their walls and we've also bombed them, but in spite of that their dragons did not go out of control and waited firmly for a person to give them directions?'

Even if a strong sedative was used to restrain a dragon's instinct, that dragon could then hardly be considered usable. However, these Baians, like a well trained horse, rode together with the soldier as one and were cutting through his dragoon cavalry one by one.

Ravan Dol was surprised, but not all his attention was stolen away. By some near unconscious act, he raised his right hand and signaled to his men. The new breed of Yunions lowered their backs and charged with their horns. Yunions were fast. They were the ideal breed for disrupting the battlefield. In that opening, Ravan called back the large-framed Sozos and prepared to encircle the enemy.

Piiii

At that moment, a loud whistle pierced through the dragons' rumbling tremors. Ravan turned with a start to look its direction and saw a figure on the fortress' third level. She bore the appearance of a young girl. That girl lifted her arm up.

On doing so, the Baians that were beginning to lose their chain of command and being pushed back by the Yunion's assault quickly spread out, some smashing into nearby storage houses to dodge the Yunions' horns. They bore their fangs at the Yunions, but their scales were tough. The soldiers riding above swung their dragon spears thrusting the Baians' soft necks.

During that time, several Baians and two-fold the number of Faes appeared dashing towards the Taulian Sozos.

Ravan put his brain to full speed and tried to give out commands, but with the dragoons in turmoil no matter the plan it would yield little effect. He found his eyes unconsciously drawn to the girl atop the balcony.

That girl—C-Could she be...

The dragons' roars and the clash of ringing metals above the dragons' backs filled the front of the fortress' courtyard.

Ax ran as if being driven away by the flames and tremors. The number of soldiers following behind him had likely decreased to under half. Most had strayed off along the way. Right as he escaped the area surrounding the Lord's Chambers, Ax violently spewed out.

D-Damn you!

His eyes and throat ached, having been smeared by smoke and dust. But he currently didn't even have time to rest. A never before tasted anger fanned a greater flame in his chest than the one enveloping the castle.

Curse you, Mephius! Curse you, Gil!! Remember this. Now that it's come to this, I couldn't give a damn about Garda or the other provinces in

Tauran. I'll dedicate my lifetime from now on all to shredding your limbs pieces to pieces.

Following one of his subordinates leading the way, he tried to get out the castle heading east. However, before he could even go ten metres, he stopped his feet in a garden at the castle keep's edge. The corpses of his soldiers lay in a pool of blood.

"You bastard." Ax grit his teeth.

Across on the opposite side was a group of airships and his sworn enemy, Mephius' crown prince Gil Mephius. Mephian soldiers lined in a row to his sides with their guns pointed.

The wind carried the heat of the flames grazing Ax's face.

"I commend you in staying alive, Lord Ax Bazgan."

"What?"

"If you had died, things would have turned slightly bothersome. I give my gratitude to your strong fortune." Gil Mephius, or in other words Orba, said in a bone-chilling voice. Having climbed up the cliff's path, they received report from the airship squadron's messenger and after confirming Ax's path of retreat, laid in ambush.

"Your trusty dragon cavalry are also being pinned by our forces. You won't be getting any help. This is it."

He had already given the signal and the Dhum's bombardment came to a stop.

They did well to hold out.

The cruiser Krau drove had also came to Dhum's rescue and catching the Taulian cruiser in a pincer, showered it in cannonfire from the side. The Taulian ship set on fire with a roar.

As for Ax, he struggled frantically to prevent the power from leaving his legs.

"Things will become troublesome if I die, you say? Weren't you aiming for my head? What could you hope for that you would go as far as raze your own fortress?"

"Exchanging it for your life, Lord Bazgan, would be a bit too large a compensation," Orba smiled and then continued.

"Even if you were to be gone, the prided Bazgan family would not surrender. In fact, there is a greater likelihood our blood family will fight it out until the last one left."

"O-Of course we would."

Even at this time he held his chest out without shedding the Bazgan family's dignity.

"That is why what I desire is a friendly relation with Taulia."

"...What did you say?"

At that moment, feeling another presence Ax quickly turned around to find enemy sokliers advancing on him from behind. Pashir and his infantry had made it seem they were being pushed back by the enemy when in fact they waited standby underground. A battle of swords took place, but the Taulian morale was low and in under several minute's passing Ax had entirely lost his path of escape. Moreover, just as Pashir seemed to move up forward, he grabbed Ax by the arms and shoulder, pinning him down. The overly smooth display of movements made even Ax forget to put up resistance for a moment.

“You! You bastard! Unhand me! Friendly relations?! What do you think you’re spouting...Ah!!!”

In this situation where Ax’s neck could be cut off any moment, the reason for Ax’s cry and his turning pale was because of the fan that had been taken from his waist. In the time he repeatedly screamed ‘Give it back!’ with neither shame nor repute, Pashir presented the fan to Gil Mephius.

“*This* will be the hostage, Lord Bazgan.”

“Wh-What!”

“You are not one to bend your knees down to Mephius even were you about to lose your life here. However, losing the very symbol of the Bazgan House would not only cease your prided bloodline but also its history. And it would be by none other than your incompetence.”

Ax tore his eyes open in a burst of anger but he eventually lost all protest and dropped his head. He certainly did not fear dying here. However that was because he could believe his bloodline could continue on together alongside the Bazgan House. Having lost the Sovereign’s Seal that was practically the very symbol of the Bazgan House, he would not be able to face neither his great ancestors nor his descendants.

What Gil said, that ‘If you had died things would turn slightly bothersome’ meant how either way even if Ax lost his life, Gil would have taken the Sovereign’s Seal and used it to threaten the leading men of Taulia. In other words even if Ax chose to bravely die here, it would merely affect the time spent threatening Taulia. A death gone wasted.

“It isn’t a bad deal for you either.”

The sounds of combat were already starting to settle. And yet, a great number of men ran about possibly more than did during wartime exchanging shouts working to extinguish the fortress fires. That had more

than anything brought Ax the painful realisation that the battle was already over.

“A few days from now, I will be leaving Apta for a short time but I’ll keep this fan at hand. Don’t be getting any weird thoughts. After I return to Apta I don’t mind even considering giving a hand in helping you unify the West. The fan should also eventually return to the hands of its rightful owner.”

The wind blew. Sparks scattered fluttering between Gil and Ax.

Ax’s battered army were hunted through the fortress and captured. Amongst them were the young general Bouwen and also the strategist Ravan Dol.

Not too long after, Orba personally turned towards airship ports and received the gallant men. Coming down first from the cruiser was Krau. Orba’s lips grew slightly open at her unsteadily climbing down the rungs while soldiers on both her left and right supported her plump body.

“Good work,” Orba thanked Krau. “You did well to return and rescue the Dhum.”

“Well of course. I’ve braved danger countless times flying low altitude through the Tsaga Mines. I’ve something an apprenticeship, an apprenticeship.”

Flying a ship in a battlefield of flying bullets and shells must have been very different. Tears were in the corners of her eyes and her blood completely gone from her face.

“Yeah right,” a soldier quietly grumbled beside her. “You clung to that rudder. As if you had any intention of going back. When you heard the order, you kept crying out ‘I’ve had enough!’ Wasn’t it when the

messenger raised the reward that your eyes lit up and you quickly turned around?”

Pretending not to hear that, Orba patted the shoulders of each of the soldiers coming down from the ship and said,

“I’ve put casks of wine by the courtyard. Once the fires have been put out you can all eat and drink to your heart’s content.”

Soon enough, the Dhum also descended slowly onto the runway. Orba likewise patted the mens’ and officers’ shoulders and gave their words of encouragement. When he caught a glance of the captain’s face,

“Hou, your face has matured into a man’s,” Orba murmured. Although young, he was a man six years elder to Orba. However, the captain gave an embarrassed smile at having been directly praised by the ‘Prince Gil’.

“I owe it to Her Royal Highness.”

“The princess?”

“Vileena-sama holds the spirit of a Mephian warrior. It may be presumptuous of me, but she is a person befitting the prince.”

“Keep talking.”

After lightly patting the captain and sending him off, Orba screwed up his eye to look at Vileena who was now climbing down the ladder.

Her firm strides were as always. Her straightened back as well. Orba revealed an expression of relief.

“As expected of the princess loved by Garbera’s skies. Tales of your feats this time will be spread widely through the world, possibly more than mine. The soldiers also seem to have been won over. Like this, won’t the

princess have the Mephian soldiers leave me behind and go for Garbera at a single command even without going as far as to threaten me—”

Speaking in his usual frivolous tone, he stopped talking with with a ‘Whoa’. The princess had finished her final stepping and began to fall down. Orba hurried to support her and caught her arms in an embrace.

“Princess, are you injured? Princess—Princess?”

Orba gripped her shoulders when he noticed. The young girl’s frail shoulders were shaking.

“What are you saying?”

Orba was again surprised in a different meaning by the voice he heard coming from under his chest. It was like a cry.

“What are you saying, prince? I’ve fulfilled the promise. You will absolutely, absolutely lead your army personally to Garbera, do you understand?”

“I-I know. That was a joke just now.”

“Joke?”

Vileena raised her head. Her dumbstruck face and clear rounded eyes were like that of a baby girl’s. “Y-Yeah,” Orba nodded. Just as he thought Vileena would suddenly burst at him, she broke out into an uncontrollable laughter.

“P-Princess.”

“F-fufufu, ahahaha, I had thought this before. but the prince’s jokes aren’t the singlest bit interesting. Even if you are genius at getting under your opponent’s skin, you’re, a-hahaha, h-horrible at, making others laugh.”

Aren't you laughing right now?

Orba let go of the princess' shoulders in disbelief. Orba had seen *this* countless times from starting gladiators right after their match. They would be freed from a fear or pressure that chipped off some of their life which wasn't bad in itself, but the sudden uplift would be too much for their emotions to come together and they would enter an exalted state.

It seems I really made her have a frightening experience.

No matter how brave a princess, she was still a girl premature in her years.

"My predictions also seem to have been naive. It was outside my list of possibilities the enemy ship would turn around that quickly. Because of my incompetence, I've caused the princess hardships—"

"Gil-sama."

Vileena interrupted Gil, not seeming to listen to a single bit of what he was saying. When he turned to look into her eyes, he saw they shone with a sparkle as if stars were embedded inside.

"W-What is it?"

"I would like to learn how to fly an air carrier."

"What?!"

"If I learn how to operate not only ships but also large air carriers I would be able to feel much closer to the sky, and it would also allow me to become more helpful in the coming battles. Going to a school for advanced pilots now would be difficult, but perhaps there may be someone here who could instruct me. It would be an inconvenience to

trouble the men of the Imperial Guards, but...aah, yes, that woman named Krau. How would she do?”

Even if you ask me that...

Orba moved his hands over his bangs and wiped off his sweat.

The cries of voices giving instructions for repair work, the ringing chorus of voices ordering drinks in toast, and the soldier’s exhilarant triumphant cries that sounded almost like a beast’s howls could be heard coming from the fortress.

Like this, the battle with Taulia signaled an end.

Chapter 7: Sword's Engraving

Part 1

"You expect me to go along with such a farce?"

Ax Bazgan expressed his disapproval.

It was only the following day after he marched his army to attack them and became a defeated general, and yet he still responded arrogantly to the prince's summons at the breakfast table. Of course, he must have suffered a great shock, but it was likely the pride of the Bazgan House that compelled him to proudly attend the meal, by not only drinking the wine but praising Princess Vileena who was seated together with them and additionally admitting to Gil's cunning.

But as this was Gil Mephius' invitation, Ax had refrained himself from a third helping of wine and scowled at Gil.

"I, who attacked Apta came across you at the top of the fortress, and as we fought we acknowledged each other and bravely came to an agreement not to shed any more unnecessary blood--? Sure, that might save me face, but who would believe a made-up lie like that?"

"That's right, no one will believe it."

"What?"

"But what's most important is you carry out that stance. Even if it's an obvious lie, if you firmly stick to it, you can make them think that it might actually be the truth."

"Are you serious?"

Ax looked to his side at him incredulously. Gil--Orba gave a light smile and after giving a side glance to Vileena,

“One of my old acquaintances once said, that ‘Even if your wife finds you sleeping naked together with another woman, it does not mean you are having an affair.’”

“Ha?”

This time, both Ax and Vileena raised their voices.

“Use whatever excuse you will. You can say the woman broke out in a fever and you were warming her up because she was cold, or say she is your separated sister and how you used to often sleep together like that when you were young.”

“*Who* would believe that?“

Even Vileena joined in objection.

“Like I was saying, no one would believe it. But if he gave up there and admitted to his infidelity, that would be the end of it. If he decides to take all the blame, then the wife will most likely stop listening to what he has to say from there on. That’s why, even if it’s a lie, even if it’s rubbish, you go through with your excuse to the end. You do it seriously, time and time again. If he gets his partner to even consider that he might be telling the truth, then it’s his win. It’s a wide difference from letting it be known it’s a lie.”

“And what kind of win would that be?”

Ignoring Vileena’s sullen remark, Orba proposed the offer to Ax again.

“What do you say? It will protect both our honour.”

“Our long years of hostility won’t quiet from that.”

Ax could guess what Orba meant by ‘both our honour’. But he fully knew letting it visually show that special consideration was being given to him was also poor etiquette.

“Very well. No matter how arduous the path, it won’t start without taking that first step.”

“It’s decided,” Orba clapped his hands. “Then settling this quickly will be best. We will return all your captured men. Lord Ax, you should also ready your preparations.”

“Preparations...Well, what preparations would they be?”

“To do it now—would be impossible. Then, tomorrow you should board your air carrier with your commanding officers and head for Taulia. We will exchange our pledges to the alliance there.”

“W-wait, Lord Gil. Aren’t you rushing this a bit? I’m sure this alliance runs opposite Emperor Guhl’s intention?”

Vileena jolted to a start and carefully watched Gil. But Gil cooly replied,

“It’s not a problem to make out of at this point. Now, you should hurry, Lord Ax. I also have to ready my preparations immediately.”

The repair of the fortress was underway, but as expected the damages were severe. There were of course, the doors, walls and batteries, and then the heart of the fortress that functioned as Orba’s living quarters was now entirely unusable. They now resided in the eastern wing of the barracks. They had managed to somehow restore it back to its shape, though it was likely only halfway done. On the other hand, it was because an alliance could be gained from this that Gil had wagered his own fortress.

To say it in other words, in the current situation where Apta could not perform its role as a fortress and Taulia effectively being Mephius’

western line of defense, if another western force were to attack Ax, Gil would not be able to send reinforcements.

Ax also understood this situation and so, gave no further protest.

And as it happened, Gil and Ax advanced through the main streets of Taulia side-by-side on horseback the next day.

They had boarded the same ship and crossed the Yunos River together, and waved hands besides another as they entered the Taulia gates and received the people's cheers.

It was a historical moment for the Bazgans and Mephian imperials who crossed swords since two hundred years past.

Ax Bazgan was a fine actor. He responded brightly to the cheers raining down on him with a lie of some oath he had engraved on the prince's body in battle as if he wished this from the start.

Ax always regarded Mephius as a long-time enemy. The number of subjects that held suspicions over his sudden change of heart did not stop at ten or twenty, of course. However, they all understood that with the current threat of the new mysterious growing power threatening the western nations, any further dispute with Mephius was not a good idea. And with Mephius as their ally, many hoped they would earn the Mephians' cooperation and instead be able to defeat this 'Garda'. Orba looked out at the Taulian landscape strewn with its giant watchtowers, and then donned the mask of the smiling prince once more and continued waving.

That night, a feast celebrating the establishment of the alliance was held in the Taulian palace.

Given the abruptness, the Taulians were unable to prepare anything too elaborate, but they still arranged an abundance of the finest food and drinks they could.

Orba was exchanging greetings with Taulia's chief vassals as he watched the scantily clothed dancers, a staple local attraction of Tauran, dance to the uplifting tune of the flutes, when the elderly strategist Ravan Dol called out to him.

"I am inspired by your brilliant display of ability in battle."

"No no, it amounted to a simple parlor trick," Orba showed his white teeth. "It's been long said that clever schemes are cheap schemes. They aren't meant to be used multiple times. I'm still in the middle of learning the art of war as you can see. I would like to one day also receive your tutelage, Ravan-dono."

"Haha. I am a man whose single redeeming feature lies in raising dragons. Things like the workings of battle much less, is nothing more than a side. Speaking of which, your highness, the dragons you employed appeared thoroughly trained. Possibly, more so than the dragons I've raised. I found *that* much more devastating than having suffered a defeat in battle. Do you perhaps, have a skilled dragon tamer following you?"

"A Zerdian, a somewhat unusual one, you could say. I wanted to bring her with me, but she seems engrossed in taking care of the new breed of Yunions we received from you."

"A Zerdian…hmm," Ravan said, tilting his head. "Then could I have seen wrongly? That was—"

"Your highness," a lively voice came. Turning around, he found General Bouwen dressed in military uniform and sash. At his side, he was accompanied by a single girl.

“Is it true you will be departing tomorrow? Quickly coming and quickly going, aren’t you. I would have loved to talk all about the battle this occasion should you have had the time.”

His eyes were resolute and Orba could feel a determination in them that next time, he would be the one to seize victory. Not to mention, he bore a smile 0n his young face without a trace of grief over the loss of his men or their bitter defeat. The Tauran soldiers, it seemed, held an honest disposition. So much so that the likes of Orba felt he would get along with them much better than with Mephian nobles.

“That time will come again. I also would like to set foot in Taulia another time.” Orba received a glass of wine of Bouwen and then asked, “This lady would be?”

“She is the daughter of Lord Ax, Lady Esmena.”

“I-I am Esmena Bazgan. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The woman lowered her flaxen hair and made a bow. *Ho—.* Orba made an internal appraisal at her beauty. She was taller than Vileena and Ineli, though her face was still young, and also there was something about her gaze that made it look like she was dreaming. It gave a feeling of a tranquil warmth completely free of the world’s hardships or malice, and pure of suffering and destitution.

Seeing her stand beside Bouwen, they looked just like a couple of similar age and height. And speaking of which, Orba spoke out,

“If I‘m correct, I believe that you are engaged to Sir Bouwen.”

“Yes,” Bouwen replied bashfully.

Esmena sharply cut in, “No, that is simply a rumour.”

She ignored Bouwen who had seemingly received a shock and then stepped forward. As if it had been an illusion, her adult-like expression tensed and she directly faced him with crimson cheeks,

“What Bouwen just mentioned before is not wrong, is it? I will get a chance to meet you again, won’t I? No, I am sure we will meet again. I, Esmena Bazgan, shall be going to visit you in the near future after all.”

Th-This is...

She was different from all the women Orba had met until now. She was not like Hou Ran or Ineli, and of course, neither was she like Vileena Owell. He had heard she was nineteen; three years older than Orba.

Alice would, now that I think about it, be about the same age.

That thought suddenly crossed him. There was nothing about Esmena that resembled her, but that one common aspect inadvertently gave Orba a sense of intimacy. It might even have made him sentimental. Orba, who looked at Esmena in a new light, and Esmena whose face turned red as a beet but did not run.

—Ax, watching this from the hall entrance, beckoned Ravan closer.

“What do you make of that?”

He asked while proposing toasts.

“What of it?”

“Esmena, just a while ago, came to speak directly with me. She said to me, ‘With the prince having come to attend in person from their end, we should also send an envoy of peace over to Apta.’ She insisted the person to bear the role be herself. I had wondered why the well-behaved Esmena would propose something like that, but it can’t be...”

“The young bring about behaviour and consequences that we, who have lost that youth to time, may find hard to comprehend.”

“It’s supposed to be the first those those two are meeting, you know.”

“Who knows. It has been quite a time since I have lost my youth.”

Ax gave a grunt.

“I’ve decided to help Mephius in order to unify Tauran. Though they may be our lifelong enemies, we may as well make the most of it having decided on this. However, that prince Gil has himself a betrothed. Presenting Esmena as first wife is one thing, but as a concubine I’m not too sure.”

“For one who calls the prince impulsive, you are plenty rash yourself, my lord.”

“Say what you want. I’m not a man who gets trapped forever by old traditions.”

“Hahaha.”

Ax ignored the old strategists sarcastic prattle.

“It would be better if we could at least receive an imperial lady fit for our Bouwen or my nephew Raswan. That way, we won’t be seen as the underdog of this alliance.”

“If you are suggesting an unmarried imperial woman, then there is the imperial princess, Ineli Mephius. Though it is a result of marriage, she is still the emperor’s daughter.”

“All right. Then let’s have them start working on it in Mephius through their connections.”

“However,” the old strategist Ravan warned, “all of that is so that we can obtain a force greater than our current Taulia. We should expect an even greater battle in our quest to unite Tauran. Do not forget that.”

“And I expect an even greater performance from you also. Defeat Garda and show me a victory that can completely wipe away the two-fold humiliation we received from Mephius,” the lord gave as a little revenge.

Ravan Dol made a grimace but immediately straightened his face and nodded. They shared an odd relationship as vassal and lord.

Soon enough night gave way to day and Orba departed Taulia just before noon. He had hardly gotten any time to rest since he had came to Apta. But Orba felt no fatigue at all. Instead his body and mind were light and he even felt he could still continue on working himself to the bone.

He also had a mountain of things to do once he returned to Apta. He needed to send a messenger to Noue and establish a time and place for a meeting, and of course finish preparations for battle. And it was around time that he wanted to learn of Solon’s reaction over the alliance he formed with Taulia.

As he said before, Orba had already sent a messenger to Solon to tell how, with Garbera’s reinforcements, they were able to desperately defend Apta. If that heightened gratitude towards Garbera and the want to send reinforcements, that was all he needed.

That's where I can expect movement from Fedom and his men.

Fedom Aulin, naturally, was bound to express anger at Orba's arbitrary actions, but at the same time he would surely come to Gil Mephius' defence. He had been frequently keeping in touch with the anti-imperial faction, so they might gather in numbers and support him. Then there was the existence of Simon Rodloom, who most likely commanded the greatest trust amongst the nobles and imperials. And he, as Orba had seen, was a heavily dutiful man.

Within the territory of Apta, there still remained the problem of the bandits. Since his previous inspection, Orba had the former slaves sneak into the surrounding villages to find clues for the bandit's base. If it came to it, Orba could always use a ship loaded with food and goods as bait to lure them out, so Orba wasn't in too big a hurry to deal with them.

Lastly, was the problem of their military force.

In the battle this time, they had suffered less than half the casualties of Taulia who had lost over 100 men, but over 50 of the sword slaves wished to withdraw from the infantry. Of course, he had no intentions of straying from his promise of granting them their freedom.

Should i try recruiting soldiers from Apta and Birac?

When he would lead his men as reinforcements for Garbera, he would need to gather more than a good amount of soldiers. As for the recruitment of soldiers in Birac, he planned to ask for Zaj Hamann's cooperation.

The various problems he harboured were a mountain full, but Orba found them to be worth handling and his eyes brimmed with energy. It did not compare to his days as a boy where he had to drink dirty water off the ground. It also didn't compare to his life as a gladiator, forced into a fight to the death. The snot-nosed Orba who would pick up a wooden sword in

Drought Valley and do nothing but get into fights was right now finally doing something of his own will and accomplishing it by his own strength!

“Oh? That’s quite a happy face you’re making, your highness.”

Shique said grinningly onboard the Dhum bridge.

“It happened I became acquainted with Ax’s daughter at Taulia,” Orba remarked sarcastically.

“I-I don’t believe this..”

“It’s great that you get to make Princess Ineli and these princesses cry, but I’ll be troubled if you forget your true commitment.”

For his joking tone, Shique’s eyes were painfully sharp. He was a slippery man with an easygoing attitude, but when things came to Vileena there were times he turned unrelenting.

“As if I could forget. You should also brace yourself. We’ll be headed to battle soon.”

“Wait, hold on,” Shique renewed his attitude and spoke in a whisper that could not be heard by others, “You might be fine with that, but the soldiers are tired. You should give them time to rest.”

Ahh, two or three days should be fine. That’s enough to get plenty of rest.

Shique expression finally turned to amazement. Orba gave a sideways glance at him and then faced forward. The lush, open sea reflected in the window in front of him. Just as that openness seemed to run on forever, he felt he could also fly on forever.

Part 2

Around that time, a pile of materials stacked near the dragons' stables where repairs were underway. As far as the eye could see, there wasn't any part of the fortress not damaged, but even amongst them the priority of the restoration of the stables was high. Of course, they were being mindful to the dragons' condition. They locked the dragons in the cages they used for transport on the way and managed to calm them for the time being, but there was no telling when they might destroy the cages in a fit of aggravation and run away or break into a fight amongst themselves. That would result in unnecessary damage and casualties.

Even then, having Hou Ran alone was enough to make the situation considerably brighter. She would occasionally bring the large dragons along to the parade ground and have them move around, and the medium and small-sized dragons would participate in the dragoons' training under her supervision as they currently were, so it didn't seem very likely the dragons would build up any stress.

That day, as Krau gripped her head in pain from a hangover and drew water from a well near the dragon stables, she nearly dropped the ladle in mute amazement when she came across the sight.

Inside the cage, amidst the dragons' clamouring stood Hou Ran. Curious as to what she was doing, Krau saw her holding a long brush also used for cleaning the decks scrubbing the dragons' bodies. Outside the cage, a group of men stood nervously, and occasionally acted on Ran's instructions and emptied a bucket of water inside.

"Stop, stop, what do you think you're doing?!"

Krau ran towards her, forgetting all about her hangover. She was convinced that someone had offhandedly made a slave do this as entertainment.

“The dragons are happy when I do this for them.”

She was rather calm.

And in fact, each time Ran brushed against them, the dragons would groan facing their backs to her in a way that let her easily groom them, and wag their tails up and down.

“If I’ll be!” Krau exclaimed in wonder, but that wasn’t all she had to say. “Don’t tell me that you’re actually bad at getting these things. What about you go ask the master for an easier job?”

“An easy job. As in?”

“You’re young and pretty, ya see. All ya gotta do is stay beside him and smile. I also did that and got away from all the painful work when I was young. It doesn’t matter what your status is, cause men are simply creatures you see. Just whisper love into his ears and pull back a little shyly. And if you add on something like ‘I know our statuses are different, but even then I can’t hold back this feeling’, then that’ll be perfect.”

The surrounding soldiers at that moment were startled not by Krau’s flirtful voice but by Ran who broke into a giggle, possibly more startled than when they saw her up close to the dragons.

“I’ll teach you how to sing and dance. And then I’ll teach you the types of topics that catch a man’s interest.”

“It seems harder than taking care of these dragons.”

“It’s simple to learn. At least you won’t have to worry about being teared to shreds by a dragon’s claws or fangs. Hurry and get out. It’s dangerous! I can’t bear to watch.”

“Maybe one day, I’ll have you teach me.”

Ran stroked her brush against the side of a Baian, when another dragon pushed its back onto her insisting on its turn, and she turned around gently caressing its neck.

Having made his way back to Apta, Orba was first about to make his way to his private room, now resituated in the barracks, and finish up his work, but before he had, he suddenly remembered something.

After checking that no one was around, he reached towards his chest. Hanging there was a still somewhat disfigured medal. It weighed on his mind the entire time, but following the hectic amount of work he had the past few days, he had ended up entirely forgetting about it.

And so, Orba decided to pay a visit to the blacksmith alone. Midway, along a garden near the gates leading to the keep, he spotted the back of a single old man. Orba stopped. It was one of the blacksmiths he had seen when he performed an inspection of the fortress.

His name was Sodan, a man with disheveled hair. From his appearance he seemed quite old, but according to him he had yet to reach his sixties. Orba called his name and walked towards him. Sodan turned around. His eyes were more heavy than sharp enough to warrant him a man who could not properly hold a conversation, yet for the situation at hand he paid the proper respects to the prince.

“Is there something you need from me?”

Orba handed him the medal and made his request. Sodan readily agreed to undertake it, so Orba was about to take his leave when his eyes suddenly stopped on the numerous swords buried into the ground. It also caught his interest the last time he noticed them.

Sodan was, as it seemed, picking up the scattered swords that had fallen out of place and returning them to their original positions. Curious, Orba decided to approach him to ask.

“These are gravestones,” Sodan said.

“Gravestones?”

“These are all swords I’ve smithed. The names of dead soldiers are engraved on their blades. Though it isn’t like I’ve remembered all of them. I only engraved the names of the dead whose faces I’ve seen and remembered.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ahh, I seem to have been too short-spoken. These are the graves of soldiers who perished in Apta, is what I mean. I’ve spent the majority of my life here you see, and quite a few of those I know have died. Someone as great as the prince may not understand, but those who died in battle are all cremated together and don’t have their own graves. So I at least crave the names of those I remember and engrave their souls into the swords. But too many lives were claimed in the battle when the fortress was taken by Garbera, and the numbers here are only a fraction of them.”

I see, he said under his breath. Orba gazed at the numerous swords. Names were as he said, carved on the blades. Millan, Ceed, Raphael, Angas...Orba chased after the names of these people whose faces and history Orba did not know and held no significance to him when he suddenly realized. There was something familiar about them. It wasn’t the names. There was a certain style to the engraved letters, something to it that Orba recognized all too well.

Orba quickly called out to Sodan, who had finished returning the swords to their original positions and was about to excuse himself.

“You said that a-all of the swords here were made by you.”

“Yes. What of it?”

“Do you remember *this*?”

As if he couldn’t stand to waste a single second, Orba quickly removed the sword fixed on his belt. A shortsword sixty centimetres long. On it were engraved letters. It was his own name, ‘Orba’.

“Ho,” Sodan frowned. “That is unmistakably something I made. However, that is surely something unfitting to be carried by the great crown prince. Did you take it out from here? No, there shouldn’t have been a sword I made that size as a gravestone.”

“...I was entrusted it by a certain man. Do you remember? There should have been a man who asked you to make this for him. Could you teach me where that man went, or how he is doing in Apta?”

Without realizing it, Orba approached closer to Sodan.

With the force he approached him and that sword in his hand, it would probably seem like Orba was trying to stab the old man.

Sodan however, did not cower at all.

“I can’t say,” Sodan said thinking. “I have forged a countless number of pieces of equipment after all. They are all to me like how a child is with its toys. I can tell if it is mine and when I made it from looking at the sword’s characteristics, but I do not remember as far as each and every person I gave the swords to.”

As he said this, he reached his hand out to the sword. Otba chest tightened, but he handed over the sword with a pained expression. Sodan narrowed his eyes and carefully examined the sword from every angle.

“The sword isn’t that old,” he mumbled. “Ten years, no not even that much, it was made five or six years ago. Let’s see, the balance between the blade and handle also feels different from a regular shortsword……Do you know the name of that man?”

“His name is Roan.”

“Roan...Roan. Hmm. I at the least carved his name, so I do feel like I vaguely remember something, but that was along with tens of others. My memories are all getting mixed, and I can’t be sure.”

“Please. Try to remember. I’ll do anything.”

“Even if you say that...Still, I feel like this sword is somehow different from those I normally make...but as for how...”

He tilted his head for some time, then suddenly his heavy eyes opened. *Aah.* Orba felt his breath stop.

“I remember. It was a strange request. If I’m certain, it wasn’t for himself but his family that he asked me to make this.”

“T-That’s him. It’s unmistakably him.”

“Didn’t he dump the majority of his pay meant for himself in front of me? At the time I was fairly busy, but you could say he was a strong-spirited one and I felt myself moved and wanting to have a go. A request for a sword that a child can handle. I had never made anything like it, so it also slightly stoked my urge to make it.”

“And then? And then what happened to that man, Roan?” Orba asked him restlessly.

He had long forgotten he was currently wearing the mask of ‘Gil’.

“What happened?” Sodan slumped his narrow shoulders. “He was a regular soldier stationed in Apta. Of course he—”

It was right when Sodan began to say this.

He did not know why, but Orba, who should have only been paying attention to Sodan thought he felt an ominous presence out of the corner of his eye and turned his sights toward it. There was no one there. Just as before, there were only the numerous swords buried into the ground.

“*Ahh.*”

Sodan gave a sigh after noticing the direction of Orba’s gaze. Orba silently approached the sword with his sight nailed on its engraving and he pulled it out. Even up close it read the same. The name engraved on it was most certainly,

ROAN

“The last time I saw him was in the middle of Garbera’s siege.” Sodan’s voice sounded strangely muffled. “It was after the commanders all fled, you see but he probably did not know about that. This is what the Mephian soldiers taken captive after the fortress fell said. He encouraged everyone and fought believing reinforcements would come until the end. Afterwards, I saw his body in the pile of dead Mephian soldiers and made him a sword as a gravestone. This is my memory of him.”

“No...way,” Orba muttered, his voice cracking. “He’s a different person. There are others with the name Roan. He’s not the Roan I know...”

“He seems like a important person to you. Please wait a moment.”

Sodan returned to his workshop and brought out a bundled piece of parchment and handed it to Orba. Orba received it half-dazed and opened the paper.

The sword's design was drawn there. Orba gulped. He could immediately tell this was something drawn by his brother Roan. It was a blueprint. It specifically indicated where the letters of ORBA should be engraved. Below it was a sketch of a person's hand.

"Make it so it easily be held with a hand this size, he told me," Sodan told him.

Orba trembled.

Even after Sodan stood the sword against the wall and gave his farewells, Orba did not move from that spot for a long time.

Orba placed his hand over the sketched hand. Of course, his hand already already grown much bigger and they no longer overlapped. But he was sure he could feel a warmth there.

"See you, Orba."

The warmth of his brother who, for some reason, asked for that handshake six years ago.

Wasn't that so he could prepare this? To remember and measure the size of his little brother's hand with his own.

Orba trembled, for a long time.

At that time Vileena came to welcome the prince, but it was when he had already disembarked the ship, so she made her way to his private room only to find he had not returned yet.

She didn't have any important business with him, but once Vileena set her mind on something she would carry it out. Be that as it may, chasing

around after the prince with no important business could be considered unacceptable in itself, so she searched for some plausible reason.

They should be having a conference for when they send reinforcements to Garbera. Maybe I should ask if I could attend.

For the time being, she had given herself a reason that would justify her visit. Still, if she badgered him too much about it, that would only have the opposite effect. *First, I shall give my congratulations and curry his favour.* she reflected.

Dealing with a child has its troubles.

She nearly giggled. She felt she had gotten somewhat closer to this man named Gil.

Men engaged in the fortress' repairs ran back and forth. Most of them were shirtless and Vileena could feel her cheeks reddening, but she endured it and asked for the prince's whereabouts.

"He went up the keep's central stairs not too long ago."

"I see, thank you!"

As soon as she thanked him, she flung her head around and ran off. Quickly, one of the men called to her,

"The inside of the keep is dangerous! There's a chance of collapse, so don't enter any way with a rope up!"

Vileena waved her hand to acknowledge her understanding, but never turned back.

For no reason at all, the men exchanged glances and smiled.

When he came to, Orba was on the fortress' uppermost level.

The majority of the uppermost level had been destroyed by the bombing, so to be more accurate this was the chamber of the floor below. Here and there the floor caved in, cracks could be found, and the room was littered with debris and dark soot. Across the upper-half of the decimated wall was the evening sky. The dark clouds crept heavily across the thin, vermillion-lit sky.

He's dead.

And here, under the sight of the damaged fortress and blood-stained corridors and hillside, Orba found himself quite literally overtaken by the true sense of that word. The evening vermillion, red as blood, soaked into Orba's eyes and had him picture himself as Roan, seeing the sprawled corpses of the soldiers lying there at the time.

Dead?

Just by closing his eyes, the scene at that moment vividly came to him. His brother, wearing a mismatched set of armor and helmet, brandishing his seemingly heavy sword and encouraging his friends who lost their fighting spirit, then running out believing help would come.

Orba collapsed on his hands and knees, feeling the ground beneath him might cave in at any moment.

They're taking too long to come.

Droplets fell down staining the floor.

They are *taking too long to come, aren't they, Roan.*

He knew somewhere that there was no way his brother had lived. He knew this since six years ago. And yet, if he didn't ascertain it himself he

could not accept that conclusion. It was that tiny inkling of a wish he harboured, so small that it could not even be considered hope.

And even more so after becoming the prince's body double and finding that faint light lit towards his future.

His hope expanded again when he had jumped out where the open sun shone. He felt if he gained power as prince, he could one day reunite with Roan, Alice, and his mother.

Now, he realised it was all an illusion.

Recruit soldiers?

He was revolted by the he who thought that way. Those high commanders saw the simple soldier as nothing but numbers. Roan was unmistakably one of them. And without his name even being remembered, he had fallen as a corpse. Then once the battle ended, he was lumped together as nothing but a number in the casualties.

I'm the same as Oubary. I'm the same as those rotten Mephian nobles.

Unnoticed, someone stood frozen behind Orba breaking down into a loud wail. She stared on in surprise and, as if she had seen something she should not have, suddenly turned her back and quickly descended the flight of stairs.

Part 3

Things flow on without pause. Even if the same event were to happen to two people, one might blow past like the wind while another might find himself swallowed like a wave and sent to some unexpected place.

As for whether these should be called their individual fates or the simple flow of time, that would be for the people of the future to decide.

Noue Salzantes had received the following notice in the lands of Garbera.

Gil Mephius not only repelled Ax Bazgan's forces which had marched their way into Apta but formed an alliance with them two days later.

"Fufu."

"Lord Noue, you look happy."

Roger, commander of the calvary, said to him. They were busy preparing for the war. Currently, the Garberan roads were filled with travelling groups of cavalrymen and infantry, and items necessary for the upcoming war.

"Not particularly. Just that with this, it has become easier to move."

Noue smiled and left the library, exiting the living quarters. Soon the seasonal winds would blow across the Garberan lands. Now that he remembered, Ryucown did enjoy viewing the bending grass fields as he took a leisure stroll on his horse.

Gil Mephius. I had thought he resembled Ryucown, but that *is something different.*

What Ryucown possessed that Gil did not was 'charm'. He was overflowing with intelligence and wit, but there was something of a gap to it. That gap of his was what fascinated others. Something that made others think, 'He would be hopeless if I wasn't there for him'. This was what drove them to want to gain his trust, and to exhibit their abilities greater than they normally would.

However, Gil most likely does not have that leisure.

Being watched by those eyes was unnerving. He could not tell what the man was scheming under those eyes. There was no charismatic aspect that fervidly won over his men, but it did make Noue think that he did not want him as an enemy.

I can't deny I've felt that myself on more than one occasion. But in these warring times I can't tell how far we take this path of cooperation with Mephius. I shall make the most of it and fully gauge his capabilities while he remains an ally.

That, to Noue, was the greatest enjoyment of all.

At the same time in the territory of Mephius, a battalion of men rode towards Apta.

At the helm, leading these 500 soldiers was Oubary Bilan. Having successfully quelled the slaves' rebellion, he had been ordered by the emperor to head for Apta without any time to rest.

It was when he drew near Apta, a day's travel away, that he discovered an alliance had been formed with Taulia.

"He joined hands with the foul Bazgans? Ha!" Oubary sneered, taking residence in one of the more luxurious inns in town for their rest stop. On the floor were several female slaves waiting on him that he had bought from the nearby Kiluro.

"He's finally overstepped his line. Let him pray he hasn't earned the emperor's wrath."

The decade-long war that continued with Garbera had been brought to a close through a political marriage and next, just when he thought he could deal with their lifelong enemy, the Bazgans, he found that an alliance had also been formed with them. For one such as Oubary who

raised his name through battles and found that it was only through battles that he could satiate himself,

“Things are getting less and less amusing.”

-those were his wholehearted feelings.

And in the imperial capital, Solon.

Similarly to Orba who had made his way to Apta, Fedom Aulin wss swamped with a busyness enough to shave away at his lifespan. ‘Support the prince and the should the situation require it rise against the emperor’—operating under this agenda Fedom had at long last acquired an adequate number of supporters; just as he was at the point where could think this, he heard from others talk of the alliance formed with Taulia.

“I can’t tolerate this any more.”

He furiously rode his horse for his mansion located in Solon.

It was the talk of the nobles in the palace, and the majority took this as Gil’s *defeat*. It was widely known that his thwarting Ax’s first attacked owed mainly to Garbera’s reinforcements and that in the second battle, Apta fortress had been so much as half destroyed.

Most likely, there was some ongoing situation in the Tauran provinces that he needed to turn his attention to, so he attacked Apta and threatened Gil into an alliance in order to subdue Mephius for the meanwhile. That the imperial crown prince Gil Mephius had unconcernedly come to Apta with only a handful of troops must have been like a godsend to Ax.

“It seems the prince’s grace ends here.”

Many of the nobles decidedly agreed on this. But to generals like Rogue Saian, his defeat wasn't unreasonable.

"The prince deserves to be praised for defending with a force that small. Damn it to hell, If I had known Ax would really attack us at full force I would have pushed these old bones of mine and ran to his aid, even at the expense of rousing the emperor's anger."

It was the prince's first time facing a defensive battle. In addition, there were no experienced commanders there to support him. Amongst the generals, voices of sympathy were predominant.

When the emperor received the news, he made a scornful and disbelieving sort of mutter. *And he said he would take Ax's head...*

"Now then let me ask you, men. What kind of letter shall I deliver to my foolish son Gil? A fatherly one of gratitude? Or a rebuke to the fool who fell behind the Bazgans, our long-time enemy?"

On the other hand Fedom Aulin, through the page Dinn, was given a more detailed report on the situation than what the other nobles had received. Included was how Orba was the one to corner Ax, and how it was by his own judgment that he decided on the alliance. He could no longer tolerate turning a blind eye to Orb's behaviour.

Isn't there some sort of handy magic that Hermann can use? Something like those often found in legends and lore, that can easily control someone?

One the one hand, Fedom was nearly about to lose himself in his anger, but this event also sprouted a response favourable for Fedom. It was because the emperor's outrageous treatment towards his own son had prompted frowns from many of the aristocrats.

I'll start everything once Orba returns to Solon. Then I'll introduce all the supporters to him. That is when my battle truly begins.

And for that cause, he first needed to bend Orba to his will. Fedom arrived at his mansion, dropped down from his horse, loudly pushed open his door and called out Hermann's name.

But it was his page who had come to inform him a guest was waiting. He frowned and asked who it was.

"Good day, Lord Aulin."

Giving a glance at the young girl who smiled at him in the main room, he quickly adopted a courteous attitude.

"If this isn't Princess Ineli. I'm deeply obliged by you specially coming."

It had been a while since he had seen Ineli in person, ever since Zaat's rebellion. Her already fair white skin seemed to have paled a bit more and perhaps due to her exhaustion, her eyes seemed bigger than usual. Still, Ineli released a bewitching smile that did not match her age.

"I had something to ask Lord Aulin so I took the opportunity to wait here."

"To ask me? Well, I'm not sure if I know anything that might interest the princess."

"It's about my brother."

Fedom's forced smile momentarily turned stiff. At his reaction, Ineli turned her eyes up and asked questioningly,

"Somehow, the relationship between you and my brother has suddenly turned good. There are even a bunch of rumors spreading in the palace.

How you are raising the prince, whom no one paid a glance at, and might be building a force against the emperor."

"Truly an interesting joke."

"Isn't it also around that time that brother changed, I wonder."

Ineli continued smiling. Feeling sweat overtaking him, Fedom called a page over and ordered him to prepare some tea.

"Changed….he has changed, you say?"

"Yes. Many have said that it is as if the person himself has changed, no? He saved Princess Vileena at Seirin Valley, defeated Ryucown on his first campaign, and just recently, predicted Zaat's rebellion and prevented it before it could take place."

"Men are creatures that can grow into a different person in the blink of three days. This holds especially for the imperials who spend their days aware of the mission and responsibility entrusted to them through their noble blood..."

"I would also like to think that," Ineli said softly, interrupting Fedom's words.

"But don't you think the change is a bit too severe? That time, when I was about to be taken away by Zaat in particular. Brother chased after me on an airship and even after being shot by Zaat, he triumphed. They were things I heard of from the time at Seirin Valley and the time he fought Ryucown as well, but it was at this moment that I came to see the 'changed' prince."

"As I was saying, that is..."

As Fedom was about to send a laugh,

“Yes. Allow me to jump to the point.”

Ineli elegantly lifted up the cup of tea the page brought over, pursed her lips, and took a sip.

Ineli spoke the words like a whisper. “The current Gil Mephius—isn’t he perhaps an impostor?”